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Enjoyment of literature.

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THE  
ENJOYMENT OF  
LITERATURE

by  
ELIZABETH DREW

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*With love*  
*to*  
B. W. D.






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## P R E F A C E

THERE are all kinds of creative artists in the field of literature, but there is only one kind of critic of books who is of the least value, and that is the critic who makes us want to go and read the books he criticizes. The function of criticism is to send people to literature.

And the aim of the teaching of literature is the same. The facts of literary history can be taught, but the only way in which the love of literature can be taught is by arousing the desire to read literature, and all the teacher can do towards that end is to describe and analyze his own enjoyment, to try to communicate his own sources of human and intellectual and artistic delight in books.

The heart of that delight is the same for everyone, for the power and the glory of literature will always be that it enlarges and enriches life. That is its value to the most primitive as well as to the most accomplished reader; it is its universal and comprehensive activity. The small child, spelling out *Robinson Crusoe* or *Winnie the Pooh*, and the cultivated reader of *Paradise Lost* or *War and Peace*, are alike finding in books an extension and expansion of their actual living in the world of men.

D. H. Lawrence says in one of his letters, 'If I were talking to the young, I should say only one thing to them . . . Try to find out what life is, and live.' There is no better exhortation, but the life of even the freest and most active of us is strictly and sternly limited, and



it is the chief of the enjoyments of literature that through it we can share in a range of experience which we can touch in no other way. It may be that these modes of living are utterly remote from any we know in our daily lives, and indeed the most widely read of all literature is of this kind. It has been labelled by the psychologists *the literature of escape*, and it is the result of the common human craving for 'something different,' for a refuge from the dullness and drabness, the harshness and baseness and emotional poverty of much of the real world. In such literature the writer creates in the place of the real world, a world whose standards are free from the thwarting bounds of the actual, and the reader follows him there. He may escape with the author of *The Arabian Nights* or *Treasure Island* into the world of practical or romantic adventure; or with the poets of *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* or of *The Lady of Shalott* into the world of sensuous dream. Or, on a lower literary level, he may follow the writers of a hundred best-sellers into a world of comforting and comfortable wish-fulfillment, where the mighty fall and the lowly are lifted up; where all the women crackle with sex-appeal, and all the men manage to combine the attractions of the cave-dweller with those of the perfect English gentleman.

The literature of escape will always flourish. We all live, as Dr. Johnson said, in a world bursting with sin and sorrow. Life is unintelligible and monotonous, human relationships are inevitably unsatisfactory, human experience is inevitably circumscribed, and every individual is the victim of what Walter de la Mare calls 'poor mortal longingness.' But the worlds to which books introduce us can, if we will let them, play parts in our lives and their developments infinitely more wide and varied than those of anodynes for life's distresses and havens from life's unrest. Literature is not only a

refuge *from* life, it is a revelation *of* life. It is the communication, in words, of every imaginable kind of human experience, from the most profound to the most trivial, from the pinnacle to the pinpoint, from a nutshell to infinite space.

To suggest some of the human and intellectual and artistic stimulus to be found in literature is the aim of this book. The only difficulty has been to know where to begin. But as the book is not intended for those whose taste is already assured and sophisticated, but is written as a help to those readers who need a more detailed and definitive approach, its arrangement is particular rather than general. When Aristotle said that Tragedy should not be expected to produce every kind of pleasure, but the kind proper to it, he said something profound about every kind of literature, and the method of this book is an expansion of that idea. It sets out to examine the various types of literary creation, and illustrates from the study of certain masterpieces in each category, something of what is the unique interest and essence of each, and the pleasure proper to it.

If it can kindle in the reader the wish to experience personally that interest and enjoyment, its purpose will be served.



*THE ENJOYMENT OF  
LITERATURE*





## THE LITERATURE OF GOSSIP

IT is the directness and immediacy of the appeal of letters and journals which make them so dear to the reader. Perhaps it is because letters, above all forms of writing, spring from the affections. Their writers are, in general, single-minded, disinterested folk who pursue their occupation partly from the simple wish to give pleasure to others, partly from the sheer love of what they are doing. They have no thought of fame or futurity, and none of the conscious, unswerving quest of the artist for perfection of form. They write at a particular day and hour for the eyes of a particular reader, and their creations are the literature of leisure, of love and of friendship, the literature of intimacy and of inessentials.

There is, moreover, a feeling of fragility and destructibility about letters which belongs to no other form of writing, and which gives them a value of their own. Books are sturdy things, which soon change the impermanence of manuscript for the persistence of print, and remain thenceforth invulnerable. But letters can be hidden for years, for centuries even, at the mercy of a chance accident, and survive or are destroyed by the operations of fortune. When Sir William Temple died in 1699, his private papers, including the letters his wife had written to him before her marriage, when she was Dorothy Osborne, went to a grand-daughter living in a Suffolk village. She in turn left them to her son, who was vicar of a neighboring village, and at his death, being childless, he bequeathed his vicarage and its con-

tents to the husband of his wife's sister. It was this gentleman's son who brought the letters to the notice of Thomas Peregrine Courtenay, author of a life of Sir William Temple published in 1836, but the letters themselves were not published in full until after they had passed through the hands of six owners, nearly two hundred and thirty years after the last of them had been sent by Dorothy Osborne herself to her lover.

All this creates a particular atmosphere about the reading of letters which we do not feel in the presence of other forms of writing, but it is, of course, the personality of the writers and the actual subject matter of the literature of gossip which is the chief reason for its direct human appeal. Man is a social animal, a gregarious creature, passionately interested in his fellow human beings, their lives, their thoughts and feelings, their environment, their occupations. And nowhere in literature can he find the same unashamed interest in these things as in letters and diaries and journals, which communicate, indeed, nothing else.

### §

IT IS first and foremost the personalities who write the literature of gossip which engage us, for inevitably the presence of the author is felt more intimately in this than in any other form of writing. We know these men and women as we cannot possibly know the creators of works of art; we know them as their own intimates knew them; we know some of them, indeed, as no one knew them but themselves.

Let us look at some of the portraits. Dorothy Osborne, sweet, gentle reserved: 'tis not that I am sad . . . but I never appear to be very merry.' And she had cause enough for sadness. 'Can there be a more romantic story than ours would make if the conclusion should prove happy?' she writes; and indeed it was

romantic. It was in 1647 that young William Temple, the son of an Irish father who sympathized with the Parliamentary cause in the civil wars, was setting out for a journey on the continent. On the way to France, he fell in with the son and daughter of Sir Peter Osborne, who was holding Guernsey for the King. They all stopped at an inn in the Isle of Wight, and there the hot-headed young Osborne wrote with a diamond some Royalist sentiments on a window. For this the party was arrested and brought before the Governor, and Dorothy, relying on his chivalry, took the crime on herself, and in consequence they were all released. Temple fell in love with the high-spirited girl, and she returned his feeling, but the outlook seemed very dark. Temple's father was a keen Cromwellian and Sir Peter Osborne an equally keen Royalist. Both fathers had other views for their children, and it was not until seven years later that all obstacles were overcome and they could marry.

Dorothy's letters date from December, 1652, to October, 1654. During all that time she is at Chicksands Priory in Bedfordshire, nursing her invalid father, suffering the constant jealous rages of her brother, dismissing suitor after suitor, and entertaining dull visitor after dull visitor. Nothing could be quieter than her life. She describes a typical day in it to her lover.

You ask me how I pass my time here. . . . I rise in the morning reasonably early, and before I am ready I go round the house till I am weary of that, and then into the garden till it grows too hot for me. About ten o'clock I think of making me ready, and when that's done, I go into my father's chamber; from thence to dinner. . . . After dinner we sit and talk. . . . The heat of the day is spent in reading or working, and about six or seven o'clock I walk out into a common that lies hard by the house, where a great many young wenches keep sheep and cows, and sit in the shade



singing of ballads. . . . I talk to them, and find they want nothing to make them the happiest people in the world, but the knowledge that they are so. Most commonly, when we are in the midst of our discourse, one looks about her, and spies her cows going into the corn, and then away they all run as if they had wings at their heels. I, that am not so nimble, stay behind: and when I see them driving home their cattle, I think 'tis time for me to retire too. When I have supped, I go into the garden, and so to the side of a small river that runs by it, where I sit down and wish you with me. . . . I sit there sometimes till I am lost with thinking. . . .

There are many flashes of comedy in the letters: scenes where smuggled letters reach her from her lover, scenes of quarrels and reconciliations between herself and her young brother, and delicious pictures of Cousin Molle, 'so nice and cautious about himself,' with his imaginary dropsies and quartan agues. But the main picture is a sorrowful one. A picture of a sad-eyed, quiet girl, so distrustful of good-fortune: 'you could fancy a perfect happiness, you say; that is not much, many people do so; but I never heard of anybody that had it more than in fancy.' She is indeed almost puritan in her feeling. She believes that happiness in this world 'might endanger one forgetting the next,' and when she comes in from a party expecting a letter from Temple, and finds none, she thinks it is a just punishment for having been too much pleased in a company where he was not. Even when the marriage is actually arranged, she dares not believe in her future. 'Dear, shall we ever be happy, think you? Ah, I dare not hope it.' Our own knowledge of the future that was in store for her lends an added poignancy to her fearfulness and distrust: for she had nine children, seven of whom died in infancy, while the adored daughter who grew into childhood died of the smallpox when she was fourteen, and the

son who remained evidently inherited her own tendency to acute nervous depression, and drowned himself when he was twenty-five, saying he had long been tired of the burden of his life and now found it insupportable.

There could hardly be a greater contrast than between the personalities of Dorothy Osborne and Samuel Pepys. Only six years separate the last of her letters and the beginning of the diary: they belong to the same world, and how fully they illustrate the folly of generalizing about the character of an age! After her marriage Dorothy Osborne might well have joined the aristocracy of the court, of whom the snobbish, middle-class Pepys so dearly loved to gossip. Perhaps indeed she did, but her London could never have been Pepys's London. Her smooth, gracious, quiet nature could never have touched life at the same variety of points as the many-faceted curiosity of Pepys. How he loves life! He might have exclaimed with Stevenson:

The world is so full of a number of things,  
I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings.

Nothing is too trivial to interest him: he likes to cram every moment of existence full to the brim. He is 'mightily pleased' by such a wide diversity of experiences; whether it is watching the Duke of York playing with his little girl 'just like an ordinary private father of a child,' or sitting up all night to see a comet, or watching a murderer executed, or listening to the nightingales in Vauxhall, or gazing at a great many fine women through his 'perspective glass' in church, or being made a Justice of the Peace, or seeing a watch taken to pieces and put together again, or going behind the scenes at the playhouse with 'that baggage, Mrs. Knepp' and seeing 'the tiring rooms and machines,' or studying Boyle's hydrostatics, or receiving a letter addressed Samuel

Pepys *Esquire*, or meeting his old Aunt James, 'a poor religious, well-meaning good soul, talking of nothing but God Almighty, and that with so much innocence that mightily pleased me.'

We watch him for ten years, kindly, amorous, stingy, superficial, working very hard at his office, eating enormous meals at home, rushing about London in every leisure moment, to the coffee-house, to the play, to the Royal Society, to the shipyards; playing on his flageolet and singing songs with anyone he can find to hold a part; regularly making ridiculous vows against wine and women, and breaking them just as regularly; casting up his accounts with the delight of the self-made man steadily increasing his income; flying into passions with his wife, and making it up again; having generous impulses towards giving her clothes and jewels, and generally putting them by from motives of economy; and finally, on May 31st, 1669, writing for the last time in the series of little brown notebooks, writing that final entry which tells that his eyes are so bad that he cannot write more for fear of going blind.

Twenty years later, in 1689, when Sir William and Lady Temple had retired to Moor Park in Surrey, a young Irishman of twenty-two, whose mother was a distant connection of Lady Temple, came to live with them as Sir William's secretary. His name was Jonathan Swift. Temple's sister, Lady Giffard, who lived with them, had as companion a certain Mrs. Johnson, and her daughter Esther, then eight years old, was to become famous later under the name of Stella. Swift left Moor Park in 1694 when he was twenty-seven, took orders, and was appointed minister to a church in the north of Ireland. Two years later, however, he returned to Moor Park and continued his secretarial duties, acting at the same time as tutor to Esther Johnson, now fifteen, between whom and himself a warm friendship grew up.

On Sir William Temple's death in 1699, Swift was appointed to the church of Laracor, near Dublin. Temple had left a little money and property in Ireland to Esther Johnson, and Swift, eager no doubt for her society, and knowing that living was considerably cheaper in Ireland than in England, persuaded her and her friend Rebecca Dingley to come and settle there. They moved in 1701, when Swift was thirty-four and Stella twenty, and lived there until 1710 when Swift came to London with the intention of remaining a few weeks, and stayed two and a half years.

During those years he wrote what is now known as *The Journal to Stella* (of which there will be more to say later), and during the same years Lady Mary Pierrepont, buried most of the time in the country at her father's house in Nottinghamshire, was carrying on a very lively correspondence with Mr. Edward Wortley Montagu, which ended in their eloping together on August 16th, 1712. It was not a happy marriage. Mr. Wortley Montagu seems to have been a very unattractive character, narrow-minded and self-complacent, stingy and suspicious. We see him very clearly when, during his embassy at Constantinople, his over-curious wife rashly tried the effect of the miraculous Balm of Mecca on her complexion.

I had a present of a small quantity of the best sort, and with great joy applied it to my face, expecting some wonderful effect to my advantage. The next morning the change indeed was wonderful; my face was swelled to a very extraordinary size, and all over as red as my Lady B's. It remained in this lamentable state three days, during which you may be sure I passed my time very ill. I believed it would never be otherwise; and to add to my mortification, Mr. Wortley reproached my indiscretion without ceasing.

No doubt Mr. Wortley had his trials too. His wife

was indiscreet and undignified, and an inveterate and irresponsible gossip; but she wrote some of the best letters in the world. Dr. Johnson declared that it was the one book, which he did not consider obligatory, which he read all through, in his whole life. In these letters, stretching over more than fifty years, she changes before us from a clever, high-spirited and affectionate girl, to a shrewd, cynical, calculating woman of the world, and thence into the most wise, witty and warm-hearted of mothers and grandmothers. She exiled herself from England when she was fifty, and found an ideal spot in which 'to while away an idle life in great tranquillity' in Gottolengo, a few miles from Brescia. There she had an old palace, and about a mile from it, a garden and a 'dairy house.' She spends her life actively engaged there, or in tending her poultry, bees and silkworms; she teaches the country people around how to make English butter and French rolls, custards, mince-pies and plum puddings; she rides, walks and fishes; finds wrinkles 'mortifying,' so adopts the very logical solace of never using a mirror; and is so full of vitality that when, at the age of sixty, she comes in at ten o'clock from twenty miles on horseback, and finds a box of books has arrived from England, she opens it, and sits up all night reading Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*.

Her philosophy is that ripe and vigorous rationalism which sees the art of living in making the most of the present, in not regretting the past, and in not fearing the future. A true daughter of the eighteenth century, she sees the greatest need of the world to be the growth of common sense, that quality of mature sanity whose lack permits of all the human weaknesses she particularly deplures—what she calls 'the quackery of churches,' the 'palpable folly of warfare' ('fully as senseless as the boxing of schoolboys'), political hypoc-

ris, the credulous use of 'universal medicines,' and the foolishness of parents: 'we mothers should take example of the innocuous inhabitants of the air; when their young are fledged, they are delighted to see them fly and peck for themselves.'

She came back to England to die, and Horace Walpole, perhaps the best known of all English letter-writers, said of her, grudgingly, by way of epitaph, 'she had parts and had seen much.' But Horace Walpole had always hated her, for she stood for the ideal of life he always disliked and distrusted. She, like Pepys, loved life, and wanted as much of it as she could get, while Horace Walpole remained forever afraid of it, the perfect portrait of the complete dilettante. He, like the Osbornes, and Temples and Lady Mary, came from the leisured moneyed class, and could spend his life in doing nothing but please himself, and he declares that he has 'a passion for antiquity and literary amusements.' But it is not true: he never had a real passion for anything, or did anything passionately. 'Born to write, converse, and live with ease,' he never knew any of the struggles, despairs or ecstasies of human, or intellectual, or artistic emotion. We see him in his letters a faithful and generous friend, a lover of animals and children, a kind and considerate master, 'partial to all youth,' strictly honorable in all his dealings, invariably courteous, sincerely sympathetic, but he himself says that his love for his mother, who died when he was twenty, was the deepest emotion of his life, and his whole attitude to the Madame du Deffand episode shows his almost sick fear of being made, as he thinks, ridiculous, by being even the recipient of an intense affection. He is always self-conscious, always wondering what effect he is making on his audience, and we can see him to the life, as he stays as a young man in the country house of his cousin the Earl of Hertford.

You cannot imagine how astonished a Mr. Seward, a learned clergyman, was, who came to Ragley while I was there. Strolling about the house, he saw me first sitting on the pavement of the lumber room with Louis, all over cobwebs, and dirt, and mortar: then found me in his own room on a ladder, writing on a picture; and half an hour afterwards lying on the grass in the court, with the dogs and the children, in my slippers and without my hat. He had had some doubt whether I was the painter or the factotum of the family; but you would have died at his surprise when he saw me walk into dinner, dressed, and sit by Lady Hertford. Lord Lytton was there, and the conversation turned on literature: finding me not quite ignorant added to the parson's wonder: but he could not contain himself any longer, when, after dinner, he saw me go to romps and jumping with the two boys: he broke out to my Lady Hertford, and begged to know what sort of man I really was, for he had never met with anything of the kind.

He never changes very much during the next fifty-odd years. We revel in the vivid social and political and literary interest of what he writes, constantly we like him for this or that trait in his nature, but throughout all the letters, in spite of their frequent charm, their wit, their historical interest, we feel that we are in the company of a man who is too often explaining his nature ever to be really natural: a man who never laughed really heartily, or grieved really deeply, or had any emotion deeply stirred in him throughout his whole existence. Macaulay dubbed him 'a wretched fribble,' and though he is far more than that, there is something meager and narrow in his nature, something which made him incapable of appreciating any robust simplicity of character (he hated Fielding and Johnson), or of having any whole-hearted enthusiasm for anything or anybody outside himself. And it is because of all this

that Horace Walpole is the only writer of first-rate letters that one does not particularly want to have met.

Walpole lived until 1797, and what, one wonders, would he have thought of a stammering young clerk in the East India House called Charles Lamb, who was then twenty-two and had already been earning his living for five years? No two men could have lived in circumstances more unlike. Horace Walpole, stamped with the hall-mark of Eton and Cambridge, travelled, dilettante, dandified, never outside the atmosphere of wealthy ease, and acquainted with every man in the public eye of his day: and Lamb, the son of a servant, educated at a charity school, 'defrauded in his young years of the sweet food of academic institutions,' only feeling at home in the unfashionable quarters of London, miserable at a Lord Mayor's banquet. And no two men could have been more unlike in personality. Personal relationships were the warp and woof of Lamb's life, and how much of an artist he was in affection can be seen from an early letter of his to Coleridge on the subject of dedicating his poems to his sister Mary.

It will be unexpected and it will give her pleasure . . . for there is a monotony in the affections, which people living together are apt to give in to; a sort of indifference in the expression of kindness for each other, which demands that we should sometimes call to our aid the trickery of surprise.

There cannot have been many men who have had so many friends as Lamb: too many, indeed, as he declares plaintively in a letter to Mrs. Wordsworth.

Never any poor devil was so befriended as I am. Do you know any poor solitary human that wants that cordial to life—a true friend? I can spare him twenty, he shall have 'em good cheap. I have gallipots of 'em—genuine balm of cares. . . .



He found he could never be alone, he was never Charles Lamb, but always Charles Lamb and Co. But he had that particular genius, the genius for attracting friends and for keeping them. He was the only man who became the friend and did not afterwards become the enemy of the famous quarrellers of his circle—Hazlitt, Godwin and Leigh Hunt. Indeed he summed up his philosophy of friendship by saying, 'I never trouble my head about other people's quarrels.' His first published letter states that he has paid a bill for Coleridge and that the money would be 'superfluous' if it were repaid; and his last letter is one of anxiety lest he should have lost a friend's book. He had, indeed, the same delicate artistry in friendship that he had in his relations with Mary.

Two or three have died within the last two twelve-months and so many parts of me have been numbed. One sees a picture, reads an anecdote, starts a casual fancy, and thinks to tell it to this person in preference to every other: the person is gone whom it would have peculiarly suited. It won't do for another. . . . Thus one distributes oneself about: and now for so many parts of me I have lost the market. Good people, as they are called, won't serve. I want individuals. I am made up of queer points, and I want so many answering needles.

Three years before Lamb's death, in 1831, a young Scottish couple came and stayed with some friends in Enfield, and they and the Lambs met each other. The earnest young Scotsman disliked Lamb's 'incurable levity,' and summed him up as an 'emblem of imbecility, and yet something too of humane, ingenuous, pathetic, sportfully much-enduring.' Lamb, it is said, was tipsy, and professing great curiosity about the young woman's porridge at supper, dipped his spoon into it. 'Your astonishment at my porridge cannot exceed my

surprise at your manners,' she rapped out. The quickness was Jane Carlyle's throughout her life, but she was not often so priggish, and her letters reveal, rather, a Lady Mary of the nineteenth century. The 'romantic revival' stood across the hundred years which separated them in date, and it accounts largely for the differences in their outlook. Both were quick-witted, rational, humorous, adventurous and warm-hearted, but Jane was a reader of Goethe and Schiller and Byron, and she was the wife of a romantic historian who was also a passionate moralist. She herself, too, possessed a nervous system quite abnormal in its sensibility, which had its effect on her whole personality. It made her exquisitely sensitive towards those in sickness or distress, but it created that atmosphere of much ado about next to nothing which haunts all her descriptions, however humorous, of her home life: that conviction that the daily round and the common task at No. 5 Cheyne Row were so much harder than in any other household; that servants were much more trying, workmen much more messy, sewing more wearisome, interruptions more irritating and paint more smelly. But with it all there is a delicious spirit about her domestic outbursts, and the way she 'splashes off' whatever is in her mind: about her pictures of the furniture standing with its legs in the air as if in convulsions, of the maid who was 'as clumsy as a cow in a flower garden,' or of Carlyle so frantic to get away, and so erratic in his plans, that living with him has been like living the life of a weathercock in a high wind blowing from all quarters at once.

'Sincerity is my favorite virtue,' she writes, and she criticizes life with the greatest vigor and independence, and has the most refreshing and wholesome intolerance of any forms of sentimentality and hypocrisy. After the death of her adored little dog, Nero, when a thoughtless young mother said 'why not have him

stuffed?', Jane immediately replied, 'Would you stuff your baby?' She hates the barbarism of a fashionable wedding, 'all that senseless singing of *Te Deum* before the battle has begun,' and will not accept the cant of saying that happiness may be found in the happiness of others: 'To eat a beefsteak when one is hungry yields a satisfaction of a much more positive kind than seeing one's neighbour eat it.' When her letters first appeared in print all the reviewers deplored her lack of refinement, and indeed by the standards of mid-Victorian propriety she was, as one journalist declared, 'manifestly no lady': 'Why the devil don't you write to me,' she exclaims to a girl friend, and on a dull visit to the country heads her letter, in place of address, 'Hell.'

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ETHICAL objections have often been made to the publication of love letters, but human curiosity is stronger in that matter than any abstract principles, and there are few of us whose interest is not deeply stirred by them. Lovers are all alike, yet in life the personality of each gives a special coloring to his emotion, and the same coloring lingers in the letters of lovers. Dorothy Osborne, we feel sure, had the same gentle dignity and reserve in the actual personal relationship which pervades her writing. She is horrified at the romance writers who make women do the courting: 'it will never enter my head that 'tis possible any woman can love where she is not first loved, and much less that if they should do that, they could have the face to own it.' Yet when she plans to break her engagement, she feels it must be an absolute renunciation. She cannot offer friendship, for, 'to deal freely with you, that were to betray myself, and I find that my passion would quickly be my master again if I gave it any liberty.' She can hint

her loneliness in exquisite implication: 'last night I was in the garden till eleven o'clock. It was the sweetest night that e'er I saw . . . the jasmine smelt beyond all perfume. And yet I was not pleased': or she can blend tenderness and humor in a most charming way:

You ask my thoughts but at one hour; you will think me bountiful, I hope, when I shall tell you that I know no hour when you have them not. No, in earnest, my very dreams are yours, and I have such a habit of thinking of you that any other thought intrudes and grows uneasy to me. I drink your health every morning in a drench that would poison a horse, I believe, and 'tis the only way I have to persuade myself to take it.

She is very sweet, but there is a certain remoteness about her reserve, which makes her an elusive, almost a vague figure. But Dorothy Wordsworth is a little like her. There is the same sense of curbed feeling in all she will allow herself to write in her journal of her passionate love for her brother.

About ten o'clock, a quiet night. The fire flickers and the watch ticks. I hear nothing save the breathing of my beloved as he now and then pushes his book forward and turns over a leaf.

Later, William is in Yorkshire with Mary Hutchinson whom he is to marry, and Dorothy goes to fetch her letters:

The woman brought me one from William and Mary. It was a sharp windy night. Thomas Wilkinson came with me to Barton, and questioned me like a catechiser all the way. Every question was like the snapping of a little thread about my heart.

Both these loving women are a little dim in themselves; they are so selfless in their love. Dim, certainly, compared with Swift who, of all lovers who have ever

put pen to paper, has the power to evoke exact outline, and to call up presences, to set the nerves tingling with actual sensation, to make the reader see and hear and touch and taste and smell. We shall never have positive proof of what were the actual terms of the intimacy which existed between Swift and Esther Johnson, but no one can read a page of the journal and not feel the impassioned affection which is behind its tender raillery and robust good-fellowship. It is the latter which makes Swift describe every detail of his doings day by day in the sure knowledge of her complete sympathy and interest, but it is the tenderness in his heart which creates the extraordinary sense of living presences which haunts his pages. He will write at any time: 'seven morning: 'tis shaving day, so good morrow, MD, but don't keep me now, for I can't stay.' (MD probably stands for 'my dears': he always included Rebecca Dingley in all he wrote). 'Come then, let us see what we have to say to these saucy brats that will not let us sleep at past eleven.' We hear the very tones of his voice: 'it is just as if, methinks, you were here, and I prating to you, and telling you where I have been.' We see him, as he describes himself, making up his mouth as he writes his endearments, as if he were speaking them to 'the saucy little pretty dear rogues,' and sometimes he talks out loud 'just as if MD had been by.' When a letter comes from them, he talks to it too: 'and now let us come and see what this saucy, dear letter of MD says. Come out, letter, come out from between the sheets: here it is underneath, and it will not come out. Come out again, I say; so there. Here it is. What says Presto to me, pray? says it . . . Hold up your head then, like a good letter. There.' Or again he will pretend that Stella is playing at being 'a wheedling slut,' and won't let him stop writing: 'I can nor will stay any longer now: no I won't, for all your wheedling: no, no, look off, don't

smile at me and say Pray, pray, Presto, write a little more.' His affection even gives him a good reason for writing badly: 'methinks when I write plain, I do not know how, but we are not alone. A bad scrawl is so snug.'

Very different in spirit are the letters of poor passion-ravaged Vanessa, the other woman in that mysterious triangle. Year after year, for ten years she writes to him, abasing herself to him, making grovelling entreaties for any sort of notice, and reiterating over and over again her undying love for him. 'It is not in the power of time or accident to lessen the inexpressible passion which I have for you. . . . Nor is the love I bear you only seated in my soul; for there is not a single atom of my frame that is not blended with it.'

To hear that note again we must go to the letters of Keats to Fanny Brawne, but the only other letter-writer who approaches that sense of perfect understanding blended with a wealth of tender absurdity, which characterize the letters of Swift to Stella, is Jane Carlyle. Tennyson declared very shrewdly that no two people who chaffed each other as whole-heartedly as the Carlyles could possibly be unhappily married, and her letters are full of absurd family jokes as well as of a certain peculiarly glowing quality of affection. 'I wish there was a glass window in my heart that you might look into it. You can never know by words how much I love you.' She will sign herself banteringly, 'your adorable wife,' or exclaim suddenly, 'I kiss you from ear to ear,' or challenge attention, 'Now stop! Have you eaten your breakfast? If not, eat it. The letter will not cool by keeping, the tea and toast will.'

Horace Walpole is characteristically frank about his distrust of any close ties, and his refusal of them. 'I am not at all of Madame du Deffand's opinion, that one might as well be dead as not love somebody. I think

one had better be dead than love anybody': and again, 'I own I cannot much felicitate anybody that marries for love. It is bad enough to marry: but to marry where one loves, ten times worse. It is so charming at first, that the decay of inclination renders it infinitely more disagreeable afterwards.' The only other letter-writer one can match this with at all is Jane Austen. Not that Jane Austen directly refuses close ties like Walpole. One suspects that the tie of love simply did not come her way, that she decided with her own Elizabeth Bennet that it was 'her business to be satisfied and her temper to be happy,' and that she made up that very sensible mind of hers that the complete sympathy between herself and her sister should be enough for her. She was clearly extraordinarily self-sufficient: when she meets a new acquaintance in the midst of 'thè elegant stupidity of a private party,' she writes: 'Miss Blatchford is agreeable enough. I do not want people to be too agreeable, as it saves me the trouble of liking them a great deal.' And when another young woman has evidently tried to become intimate with her, she comments, 'Miss Fletcher and I were very thick, but I am the thinnest of the two.'

## §

AND as we share the most intimate emotions of these men and women who write letters, so we see them in the most practical details of their daily lives. We see them shopping for each other: Temple buying orange-flower water for Dorothy Osborne, Swift sending chocolate and spectacles to Stella, and so worried because the box with the 'palsy water' has not reached her; Cowper asking for 'a genteelish toothpick' to be sent from London, or Lady Mary 'bespeaking' a mummy to take home from Constantinople. We see them spending or saving their money: Pepys borrowing a book first to see if it

be worth buying, and going through constant agonies while his love of economy struggles with his love of display; Horace Walpole pouring out his wealth to build and furnish Strawberry Hill; Swift finding his lodging 'plaguy dear' at eight shillings a week, sponging on anyone for a meal sooner than pay for it himself, haunted by the thought of Christmas boxes, and groaning at the bad weather for what it means in coach and chair hire. We know the very clothes they wore. There is Pepys in his fine Camlett cloak with the gold buttons, which cost him twenty-four pounds, and his wife 'extraordinary fine in her flower tabby suit,' or Swift complaining that his caps are all worn out, and that he 'needs a necessary woman strangely' to do his mending, and is 'as helpless as an elephant'; or there is Horace Walpole's aunt at the Court Ball, who 'had adapted her gown to her complexion and chose a silk all broke out in pink blotches,' or Jane Austen reporting a new evening frock to her sister: 'the front is sloped round to the bosom and drawn in, and there is a frill to put on occasionally, when all one's handkerchiefs are dirty,' or Jane Carlyle economizing in hard times, with a dyed puce gown and a turned pelisse, and smartening the whole effect by a bonnet 'with an air,' having a little brown feather nodding over the front and a crown pointed like a sugar loaf.

We see them in scene after scene of comedy. Lady Mary Wortley, for example, loud in her praises of the beauty of the scene in a Turkish bath at Constantinople, but refusing the experience herself:

I excused myself with some difficulty. They being all so earnest in persuading me, I was at last forced to open my shirt, and shew them my stays; which satisfied them very well, for, I saw, they believed I was so locked up in that machine, that it was not in my power to open it; which contrivance they attributed to my husband.



Or we see Horace Walpole overhearing the beautiful young Duchess of Grafton (one of the Gunning sisters) confiding innocently to old George II that her greatest ambition was to see a coronation; or Jane Carlyle all in a flutter about the goose on their Scots farm.

Did you ever watch any hatching thing? . . . I have a goose sitting on five eggs—a rather flighty sort of character—quite a *goose of the world* in fact, who from time to time drives me to the brink of despair by following her pleasures whole hours with the other geese, to the manifest danger of cooling her eggs. I hover about the nest during these long absences with a solicitude quite indescribable, and it will end, I believe, in my sitting down on the eggs myself.

There is Lamb dragged unwillingly to call on the blue-stocking lady called Miss Benje, sitting dismally partaking of tea and macaroons, and trying to discuss Miss Hannah More's views on education and whether Pope was a poet: or Jane Austen being very little of a success at a dance, 'I was not very much in request. People were rather apt not to ask me till they could not help it': or Fitzgerald trying to teach the duet *O that we two were maying* to two ladies in his Suffolk village, and commenting, 'they would sing nicely if they had voices and were taught.' Or in contrast to these there are the most moving moments of pathos: that heart-breaking note written by Robert Greene on his deathbed to the wife he had betrayed and forsaken:

Doll, I charge thee, by the love of our youth and by my soules rest, that thou wilt see this man paide; for if he and his wife had not succoured me, I had died in the streets:

or the equally heart-breaking endorsement on the note Dorothy Temple's son left behind when he drowned himself: 'Child's paper he writ before he killed himself':

or those simple words in which Swift implies something of what Stella's death meant to him:

This is the night of the funeral, which my sickness will not suffer me to attend. It is now nine at night; and I am removed into another apartment, that I may not see the light in the church, which is just over against the window of my bedchamber.

### §

FINALLY there is the picture of the past we get from the literature of gossip, that humanizing of history which comes from reading of it almost unawares, from finding it side by side with an account of the Sunday dinner and the price of tobacco, with passionate affection or a family joke. It may give an ill-proportioned and theoretically unsound view of the progress of English society, politics and literature from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries to study it in the pages of the gossip writers, but what is lost in comprehensiveness of view is gained in vividness, and I am very sure that it is the pictures of the letter-writers that live longest in the memory.

It is from them that we learn, without taking thought about them, of the manners of other ages: in them that we read, for instance, with a certain involuntary shudder, of how a cultivated, civilized man like John Evelyn would go and watch a man being tortured, or of how the body of Guiscard, the spy who stabbed Lord Harley, in 1710, was 'pickled in a trough' and exhibited for twopence. The fire of London becomes an immediate reality as we read in Pepys how the pigeons would not leave their homes and fluttered round the burning houses until their very wings were singed; and so does the South Sea Bubble, as we hear of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's unlucky speculations. Or the size of early

eighteenth-century London is suddenly realized as Swift tells Stella of walking through the sweet-smelling hay-fields between London and Chelsea, just as the size of the seventeenth-century appetite is realized as Pepys jots down the menu of the dinner he provides for his friends on January 26th, 1659: 'a dish of marrow bones; a leg of mutton; a loin of veal; a dish of fowl, three pullets, and two dozen of larks all in a dish; a great tart, a neat's tongue, a dish of anchovies; a dish of prawns and cheese.' How odd it seems to hear from Horace Walpole that the first time a company of aristocratic amateurs performed a play at Drury Lane Theatre, the rage to see it was so great that the House of Commons adjourned at three o'clock in the afternoon so that all the members might attend. And how romantic it is to find the names of the great, and descriptions of them in among the lightest of gossip and the most intimate of personal details—to hear Horace Walpole's opinion of 'that hyena in petticoats' Mary Wollstonecraft, or how Charles James Fox, after racing at Newmarket all day and gambling at Almack's all night, went straight to the House of Commons and held it spellbound for two hours by his brilliant oratory. Queen Anne becomes as pathetic as the humblest of shy hostesses as she stands holding a drawing-room, and looking round 'with her fan in her mouth, and once a minute said about three words to some that were nearest to her'; and Coleridge ceases to be a damaged archangel or 'a steam engine of a hundred horses power, with the boiler burst,' and becomes instead a gloriously comic figure as Lamb describes his own method of dealing with his friend's eloquence. He met Coleridge, he says, one day when he was going to work.

And in spite of my assuring him that time was precious, he drew me within the door of an unoccupied

garden by the road-side, and there, sheltered from observation by a hedge of evergreens, he took me by the button of my coat, and closing his eyes, commenced an eloquent discourse, waving his right hand gently, as the musical words flowed in an unbroken stream from his lips. I listened entranced; but the striking of a church clock recalled me to a sense of duty. I saw it was of no use to attempt to break away, so taking advantage of his absorption in his subject, I, with my penknife, quietly severed the button from my coat, and decamped. Five hours afterwards, in passing the same garden on my way home, I heard Coleridge's voice, and on looking in, there he was, with closed eyes—the button in his fingers—and his right hand gracefully waving, just as when I left him. . . .

The difficulty about writing of the literature of gossip is that there is no end to the subject. There is no art of letter-writing, and a discussion of it as a form could only be complete if it included every individual whose letters have been published. For the only art the letter-writer practises is the art of being himself. He is simply a human being, writing of his occupations, his thoughts, his feelings, and of those of his fellow creatures. And all that the reader need bring to the study of the literature of gossip is his natural inquisitiveness about his neighbors' affairs; the common capacity we all have to prick up our ears at tattle about other folk—whether it is to learn how Margaret Paston in the fifteenth century turned her daughter out of the house for loving the bailiff, or to listen five hundred years later to what Mr. D. H. Lawrence thought about Mr. Middleton Murry, or to what Mr. Alexander Woollcott thinks about Miss Dorothy Parker.



## THE ESSAY

THE essay is the simplest of all forms of literature, but with it we enter that world where we shall remain throughout the rest of this book, the world of the conscious art of writing. From the lowest to the highest, from the simplest to the most complex kinds of literature, we shall find henceforth that the enjoyment of it is always twofold. There is the pleasure we receive from the conscious stimulus of certain recognizable parts of our being: to our curiosity about the stories and situations of other human beings, to our emotions, to our intellectual faculties, to our moral nature, to our senses. The pleasure of sharing the adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of meeting Elizabeth Bennet, of being stirred by Milton or enraptured by the sheer music of *The Eve of St. Agnes*. Here we know clearly what it is that pleases us; we recognize both the cause and the effect of the sense of satisfaction. But in the other kind of pleasure which literature creates, we are clearly conscious only of its effect. Form works upon the consciousness as a whole; it stimulates the consciousness as a whole; it satisfies it as a whole. If it is there, the sensitive reader recognizes it at once without analysis: the whole thing is 'right,' and the reason of its rightness is not questioned. But if perfection of form is absent, if the thing is 'wrong,' the reader is conscious that something vital is lacking. Detached faculties may still receive pleasure, human curiosity may be provoked, the mind quickened, the senses stirred, but that fusion of all faculties into one general sense of satisfaction in which

the whole man is involved, is not there. Just as in a ballet the individual movements may be supple, the individual poses superb, the individual dexterity amazing, the décor perfect, but if the whole has not been bound together, fused, unified by one general spirit of rhythm, the harmony is not complete. What distinguishes the real artist from the amateur, says Goethe, is that power of execution which creates, forms and constitutes the whole.

## §

WHAT is an essay? It is impossible not to agree with J. B. Priestley that the simplest and safest definition of the essay is that it is the kind of composition produced by an essayist. The term is indeed so wide that it is meaningless. If we try to bring Locke's *Essay on the Human Understanding* and Lamb on *Old China* within the limits of a single definition it obviously cannot be done. The essay may be a dissertation, a piece of rhetoric, an argument, a discussion. It may deal with a religious, economic, historical, sociological, scientific or philosophical subject, or any other kind of subject. But it is clear that there is something very much narrower in definition which we really mean when we speak of the essay in any general discussion of literature. We mean a form of writing which aims definitely at certain *literary* values: that is, it aims at using language as a medium to present life in a way of its own.

Of all forms of literature, the essay is the one which least calls for the use of long words. The principle which controls it is simply that it should give pleasure; the desire which impels us when we take it from the shelf is simply to receive pleasure. Everything in an essay must be subdued to that end. It should lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake refreshed with its last. In the interval we may pass

through the most varied experiences of amusement, surprise, interest, indignation . . . but we must never be roused. The essay must lap us about and draw its curtain across the world./

'So great a feat is seldom accomplished,' Virginia Woolf continues, 'though the fault may well be as much on the reader's side as on the writer's. Habit and lethargy have dulled his palate.' This may be so, and yet, if the truth must be told, the reader has a good deal of excuse, for as a student he has generally been surfeited with essays, and unless the essay is superlatively good it is the dulllest form of all reading. A soliloquy is a most difficult form to sustain, and the essay is all soliloquy. The essayist has so few baits with which to catch and hold the reader's attention. He has no story to arouse his curiosity and no rhyme to charm his ear: his space is so limited that he has but little room for movement, for changes of tone and pace. He cannot afford to make any mistakes. If he write tediously or carelessly or foolishly, the essay at once capsizes and sinks; the pleasure cruise is at an end, the reader is bored.

It is because of this razor edge between charm and boredom which so many essays balance on, that we might quarrel with Virginia Woolf's declaration that the essay should never arouse us, and declare instead that on occasions it does and should. Perhaps this is only true if we admit oratory and rhetoric into essay-writing, but if speeches be written to be read as well as to be heard, it is difficult to see how they can be excluded from this whole class of writings. Burke's speeches are superb essays, and so is Milton's *Areopagitica*, that great plea for the liberty of speech which, indeed, for the delight of direct intellectual and emotional and moral stimulus, in some of the most supple and sonorous cadences in the English language, remains unsurpassed.

If I were to choose one sentence in the English language which is to myself the most kindling in its passion, and its idea and its expression, it would be one from the *Areopagitica*.

I cannot praise a fugitive and cloister'd virtue, unexercis'd and unbreath'd, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat.

The quality of that is the quality of the whole, and as a further taste of it, I quote the famous passage on the life of books.

I deny not, but that it is of greatest concernment in the Church and Commonwealth, to have a vigilant eye how Books demean themselves as well as men; and thereafter to confine, imprison, and do sharpest justice on them as malefactors: For Books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are; nay, they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them. I know they are as lively, and as vigorously productive, as those fabulous Dragon's teeth; and being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men. And yet on the other hand, unless wariness be us'd, as good almost kill a Man as kill a good Book; who kills a Man kills a reasonable creature, God's Image; but he who destroys a good Book, kills reason itself, kills the Image of God, as it were in the eye. Many a man lives a burden to the Earth; but a good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalm'd and treasur'd up on purpose to a life beyond life.

It is true, however, that the class of writings which we usually mean when we speak of essays, does not have the rousing and animating quality of Burke or Milton. Its aim is much milder, its achievement quite different.



The supreme art of the essay proper, that special type of writing which was originated and invented by Montaigne, and dates from the first publication of his *Essaies* in March, 1571, is *to communicate personality*. The essay (the word was used by Montaigne simply to denote experiments in a new form of writing), is the most direct form of prose communication between author and reader: it is deliberate egotism and self-revelation. Montaigne wrote the epigraph for all essayists, 'these are fancies of my own, by which I do not pretend to discover things, but to lay open myself.' } As Lamb said of him, 'his own character pervades the whole, and binds it sweetly together,' and it is significant that Coleridge said of Lamb himself, 'Charles Lamb has more totality and individuality of character than any other man I know.'

That is the character the perfect essayist requires. He says with Sir Thomas Browne: 'the world that I regard is myself; it is the microcosm of my own frame that I cast my eye on. For the other I use it but like my globe, and turn it round sometimes for my recreation.' The novelist or the dramatist requires to be detached from his own personality. He may be David Copperfield or Jane Eyre or Hamlet, but he must also be Dick Swiveller or Paul Emmanuel or Lady Macbeth. But the essayist must never be more than one character. The personality with which he writes may not be entirely his own, but it must be a complete personality. Elia is not the whole of Charles Lamb, nor the Spectator the whole of Joseph Addison, but they are each a completely recognizable person. We can walk round them and feel we know them in the most actual and tangible way. And we must have this sense of intimacy with the essay-writer, it is the essential of his peculiar and difficult art. He must always be the same person, and we must never be out of his company. Whatever other per-

sonality or situation or circumstance he presents, whatever book or picture or actor he is discussing, he is at pains to remind us all the time that it is *his* vision of them we are sharing. The main interest is always shifted subtly from the subject of the essay, to the kind of mind and being—the personality—which is writing of that subject. Creative egotism is the secret of the essayist, an egotism which appears, in the hands of an artist, as if it were the most simple and natural thing in the world, while in reality it is never successful unless it is presented with supreme skill. Just as his subject matter appears desultory and meandering, and is really the most carefully conceived and constructed of unities.

Alexander Smith, a minor writer of the mid-nineteenth century, who wrote a good essay, *On the writing of essays*, in a volume called *Dreamthorpe*, says that the essay resembles the lyric in that both are molded by some central mood, whimsical, serious or satirical. 'Give the mood, and the essay, from the first sentence to the last, grows round it as a cocoon grows round the silkworm.' This is a good image of the essayist's art, and is a better starting point for the illustrating of essays than a mere history of the subject. But a few chronological landmarks are perhaps helpful.

Montaigne died in 1592, and the first ten of Bacon's essays appeared in print five years later, and were the first essays to be published in England. He increased the number to thirty-eight in the edition of 1612, and to fifty-eight in the final edition of 1625. But although Bacon must have taken the idea of the essay from Montaigne, nothing could be more different than the 'moods' from which each of the two spins his thread. Montaigne must always remain the perfect example of the essayist temperament—sympathetic, humorous, unexpected, lovable, passionately curious in his search after psychological truth—while Bacon takes this new instrument for writ-

ing of the world as it is seen through the eyes of a temperament, and manages to turn it into something completely inhuman. Montaigne is a warm flesh and blood figure, sitting at ease at his study writing-table underneath the beam on which is carved *I do not understand; I pause; I examine*. Bacon is a chilly statue of Wisdom, commenting on human life in the manner of a great judge in his robes and ermine, with the greatest brilliance and the greatest detachment. The subject is always perfectly planned and presented, but it is all entirely external and general. It has all been thought, never felt. Take the opening of his essay *On Studies* as a good example.

Studies serve for delight, for ornament, and for ability. Their chief use for delight is in privateness and retiring; for ornament, is in discourse; and for ability, is in the judgment and disposition of business; For expert men can execute, and perhaps judge of particulars one by one: but the general counsels, and the plots and marshalling of affairs come best from those that are learned. To spend too much time in studies is sloth; to use them too much for ornament is affectation; to make judgment wholly by their rules is the humour of a scholar: They perfect nature, and are perfected by experience: for natural abilities are like natural plants, they need pruning by study; and studies themselves do give forth directions too much at large, except they be bounded in by experience. Crafty men condemn studies, simple men admire them, and wise men use them; for they teach not their own use; but that is a wisdom without them and above them, won by observation. Read not to contradict and confute, nor to believe and take for granted, nor to find talk and discourse, but to weigh and consider. Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested.

It is not thus that Montaigne or Milton or Lamb talk about books, and it is pretty dry stuff in spite of its ex-

cellent good sense and the excellent setting of its words.

It was not until Cowley's essays were published in 1668 that the tone of Montaigne crept into the English essay. Cowley's talent is a small one, his personality is not interesting or varied enough to bear very much exploitation of it: the vein is very soon worked out, but what there is of it is gold. In his essay *Of Myself* there is the true flavor—that intimacy and warmth of spirit, that fresh simplicity and apparent artlessness. It creates its own charm as it flows along: it is nothing, and yet it is delightful.

It is a hard and nice subject for a man to write of himself; it grates his own heart to say anything of disparagement, and the reader's ears to hear anything of praise for him. There is no danger from me of offending him in this kind; neither my mind, nor my body, nor my fortune allow me any materials for that vanity. It is sufficient for my own contentment that they have preserved me from being scandalous, or remarkable on the defective side. . . . As far as my memory can return back into my past life, before I knew or was capable of guessing what the world, or glories, or business of it were, the natural affections of my soul gave me a secret bent of aversion from them, as some plants are said to turn away from others, by an antipathy imperceptible to themselves and inscrutable to man's understanding. Even when I was a very young boy at school, instead of running away on holidays and playing with my fellows, I was wont to steal from them and walk into the fields, either alone with a book, or with some one companion, if I could find any of the same temper. . . . That I was then of the same mind as I am now (which I confess I wonder at myself) may appear by the latter end of an ode which I made when I was but thirteen years old, and which was then printed with many other verses. The beginning of it is boyish, but of this part which I here set down, if a very little were corrected, I should hardly now be much ashamed.

Books should, not business, entertain the light,  
And sleep, as undisturbed as death, the night.

My house a cottage, more  
Than palace, and should fitting be  
To all my use, no luxury.

My garden painted o'er  
With Nature's hand, not Art's; and pleasures yield,  
Horace might envy in his Sabine field.

Thus would I double my life's fading space,  
For he that runs it well twice runs his race.

And in this true delight,  
These unbought sports, this happy state,  
I would not fear, nor wish my fate,  
But boldly say each night,  
To-morrow let my sun his beams display  
Or in clouds hide them—I have lived today.

You may see by it I was even then acquainted with the poets (for the conclusion is taken out of Horace), and perhaps it was the immature and immoderate love of them which stamped first, or rather engraved, these characters in me. They were like letters cut into the bark of a young tree, which with the tree still grow proportionably. But how this love came to be produced in me so early is a hard question. I believe I can tell the particular little chance that filled my head first with such chimes of verse as have never since left ringing there. For I remember when I began to read, and to take some pleasure in it, there was wont to lie in my mother's parlour (I know not by what accident, for she herself never in her life read any book but of devotion), but there was wont to lie Spenser's works; this I happened to fall upon, and was infinitely delighted with the stories of the knights, and giants, and monsters, and brave houses, which I found everywhere there (though my understanding had little to do with all this); and by degrees with the tinkling of the rhyme and the dance

of the numbers, so that I think I had read him all over before I was twelve years old.

Some of the essays of Sir William Temple (Dorothy Osborne's husband) have this same note, but it was the coming of the periodical newspaper which really established the essay in popularity. It created a market for it, which it has never lost, so that it was not only aristocratic dilettantes who could afford to practise it; and it developed that easy, friendly manner which comes from the essayist's sense that he is writing for a familiar circle of readers who are in sympathy with him. It also encouraged the essayist to write on the subjects which make the best essays—incidents of daily life about him, the immediate, the personal, the tangible, not the abstract and indefinite. On April 12th, 1709, the first number of the *Tatler*, one little folded sheet of paper, appeared at the breakfast tables of the aristocracy and in the coffee-houses of the town, and from then onwards the eighteenth century was deluged with essays. To our modern taste, the majority of these essays are completely unreadable, except in small extracts, and indeed, the capacity of the reading public of the eighteenth century for swallowing pills in jam is one of the most surprising things about it. Why, with the example of that century before us, we continue to regard the Victorian age as the great age of moral lessons in literature, is a mystery. We are apt to think of the eighteenth century as a gay and wicked age, though it is difficult to know why. Perhaps because its greatest writers were satirists and its novelists much concerned about the sexual impulse in young men and the consequent danger of young women losing their virtue. But at no time did the daily and weekly reading of the majority concern itself so much with the moral conduct of life as it did in

the eighteenth century. If Steele gives a charming description of a happy family, he will follow it up with a paper about the death of the wife and mother, and a discussion of the ethics of Loss. If he describes his club it is to conclude how the garrulity of old age should be countered by storing the mind with real knowledge and observation. He is quite distressed when he simply cannot think of any serious moral lesson to be learned from his ramble between Richmond and London, and has to fall back on a rather frivolous one:

When I came to my chambers, I writ down these minutes; but was at a loss what instruction I should propose to my reader from the enumeration of so many insignificant matters and occurrences; and I thought it of great use, if they learn with me to keep their minds open to gratification, and ready to receive it from anything it meets with.

Even the Sir Roger de Coverley papers, the great artistic achievement of the eighteenth-century essay, are apt to be interrupted by Addison's insistence on pointing the moral, and the same is true of Goldsmith. The essay became the vehicle of platitude rather than of experience: the essayists will not let themselves be themselves because they are all so busy feeling they must be the Censor. And as a result, though it would be easy to make an anthology of first-rate passages from the eighteenth-century essayists, it is not surprising that the heart of the average student sinks when he is told that if he wants to write good prose he must give his days and nights to the study of Addison. Addison is a very dull writer, and the volumes of the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* are dull volumes, and there are many equally good writers of prose.

## §

AND yet it is not really because the eighteenth century is so concerned about problems of conduct that it is dull: it is because of the *way* in which the writers treat of them. We are all, as a matter of fact, interested in ethical questions and in reading about them, but we are not interested in having a purely conventional and general code of social and personal morality applied to every subject. It is that which stifles the individuality which is the breath of life to the essayist. Dr. Johnson's opinion of Addison fits many more than Addison: 'he thinks justly, but he thinks faintly.' There is nothing vigorous, energetic or personal in the moral values of these men. If, however, moral feeling be an essential part of the mood in which the essay is conceived—instead of being merely tacked on as an adjunct—it becomes an essential part of its total quality and effect, and we would not wish it otherwise. Ethical feeling can lap us round as securely as any other mood.

It is no longer the fashion now to read Robert Louis Stevenson. His vogue during his life and immediately after his early death was so great and glowing that a reaction was bound to set in. But his popularity will inevitably return. He was a second-rate novelist, for his creative gift was never substantial enough to write great novels, but he is a first-rate essayist. And the mood of all, or almost all, of his essays is an ethical one; he spins its thread around some problem of conduct or some tenet of his own individual faith. Stevenson had to struggle all his life with an incurable disease: he did his work unflinchingly against appalling odds. But the strange thing about his extraordinarily vivid personality was that it produced an attitude to life which, instead of being one of splendid stoical endurance of suffering,



managed to be one of positive exhilaration. He justifies life because it is a battle: he loves positive values as much as Milton: 'To avoid an occasion for our virtues is a worse degree of failure than to push forward pluckily and make a fall.' It is only over-prudence and timidity which he finds paralyzing: 'There are some to whom never to forget their umbrella in a long life, is a higher and wiser achievement than to go smiling to the stake.' 'Youthful enthusiasm may be foolish, but it is better to be a fool than to be dead.'

Whether we regard life as a lane leading to a dead wall, or whether we think of it as a vestibule or gymnasium, where we wait our turn and prepare our faculties for some more noble destiny; . . . whether we look justly for years of health and vigour, or are about to mount into a bath chair as a step towards the hearse; in each and all of these views and situations there is but one conclusion possible: that a man should stop his ears against paralysing terror, and run the race which is set before him with a single mind. . . . As courage and intelligence are the two qualities best worth a good man's cultivation, so it is the first part of intelligence to recognise our precarious state in life, and the first part of courage to be not at all abashed before the fact. A frank and somewhat headlong carriage, not looking too anxiously before, not dallying in maudlin regret over the past, stamps the man who is well armoured for this world.

Here we are very far removed from the bony conventional morality of the eighteenth century. We are in the company of a clear-cut, witty, courageous, sensitive personality, and we are in the presence of an artist in prose. Stevenson's confession that he learned his craft by playing 'the sedulous ape' to other writers has sometimes been taken to mean that his own use of language always remains imitative. Nothing is more untrue. His

early work is inclined to be a little thin and mannered and over-ornamented, but his later essays—such essays as *Pulvis et Umbra*, *The Lantern Bearers* or the once famous *A Christmas Sermon*—are the work of a complete and warmly-colored personality, communicating itself in a forthright, strong and warmly-colored prose. They lay us under a spell with the first word, and we wake refreshed with the last.

## §

THE moods in which the problems of human conduct are of supreme importance can therefore be the basis of the essayist's art as much as any other moods. But it is true that they very seldom do make thoroughly successful essays. If a personality is passionately concerned with such questions, it is ten to one that his calling will not be that of an essayist; he will be expressing his personality in some more immediately practical way. We may safely say that but for the accident of ill-health Stevenson would not have been content to write essays. The essay which the man of such a temperament writes is seldom as we say 'pure literature.' It has an ulterior aim: it seeks to convert or persuade, to argue, to discuss, to analyze, to explain. It goes over into history or politics or criticism, like Macaulay or Carlyle or Arnold. But the pure essayist, as Virginia Woolf says, seeks only to give pleasure, and we read him with no ulterior aim ourselves. His own occupations and his own acquaintance are his subject matter, and we ask for nothing of more public or general importance.

From very early days, when minor seventeenth-century writers wrote 'characters,' which, in general, were nothing but wooden descriptions of commonplace types, the essayist was fond of the character sketch. It lends itself naturally to the essay, and as we have said, the Sir Roger papers hold a unique place among early

essays. Goldsmith did something of the same sort in his pictures of Beau Tibbs, and Lamb's *Captain Jackson* is a little masterpiece in that style. These, however, are all very simple in their method of presentation, and a more complex treatment, which is indeed a most masterly illustration of the technique of the essay, is Hazlitt's *My First Acquaintance with Poets*. It is a long essay—twenty-five pages in the edition I have of it—but once started upon it, there is no one, I think, who has any interest in the literary personalities of the early nineteenth century, who could possibly want to stop. It opens without preamble, and we are at once in the atmosphere of living presences.

My father was a Dissenting Minister at Wem in Shropshire; and in the year 1798 . . . Mr. Coleridge came to Shrewsbury, to succeed Mr. Rowe in the spiritual charge of a Unitarian congregation there. He did not come till late on the Saturday afternoon before he was to preach; and Mr. Rowe, who himself went down to the coach in a state of anxiety and expectation to look for the arrival of his successor, could find no one at all answering the description but a round-faced man in a short black coat (like a shooting-jacket) which hardly seemed to have been made for him, but who seemed to be talking at a great rate to his fellow-passengers. Mr. Rowe had scarce returned to give an account of his disappointment, when the round-faced man in black entered, and dissipated all doubts on the subject, by beginning to talk. He did not cease while he stayed; nor has he since, that I know of. . .

To Hazlitt, Coleridge's talk came as a revelation:

A sound was in my ears as of a Siren's song; I was stunned, startled with it, as from deep sleep; but I had no notion then that I should ever be able to express my admiration to others in motley imagery or quaint al-

lusion, till the light of his genius shone into my soul, like the sun's rays glittering in the puddles of the road. I was at that time dumb, inarticulate, helpless, like a worm by the wayside, crushed, bleeding, lifeless; but now, bursting from the deadly bands that

'bound them, With Styx nine times round them,' my ideas float on winged words, and as they expand their plumes, catch the golden light of other years. My soul has indeed remained in its original bondage, dark, obscure, with longing deep and unsatisfied; my heart, shut up in the prison-house of this rude clay, has never found, nor will it ever find, a heart to speak to; but that my understanding also did not remain dumb and brutish, or at length found a language to express itself, I owe to Coleridge. But this is not to my purpose.

It is very much to the purpose of the essay, however, for blended throughout with the sense of the actual presences of these men of genius in all the glory of their youth and hope, is the peculiar egotism of Hazlitt himself, the conviction that somehow he is the victim of an unfair fate, and the sense of almost unbearable regret and wistfulness with which he is looking back and remembering.

The scene of the sermon which Coleridge preached, and Hazlitt listened to, on the following day, follows, and then they are joined by the presence of Hazlitt's father, and the three of them sit eating their dinner and talking together in the warmest spirit of good fellowship. 'I remember the leg of Welsh mutton and the turnips on the table that day had the finest flavour imaginable.' When Coleridge has to leave, Hazlitt walks six miles with him on his way and again they talk, and something of the miracle of Coleridge's talk does take shape before us, and the magic of his personality as a young man, and the change, alas, which the years have brought. All through that winter, the magic dwelt with

the young Hazlitt. One thought, he says, blotted out everything, '*I was to visit Coleridge in the spring.*' As a matter of fact he did not get there till the autumn, when we walk the journey with him, and get wet at Tewkesbury, and stop at the inn where he sat up all night reading *Paul and Virginia*. The next day he arrived.

The country about Nether Stowey is beautiful, green and hilly, and near the sea-shore. I saw it but the other day, after an interval of twenty years, from a hill near Taunton. How was the map of my life spread out before me, as the map of the country lay at my feet. In the afternoon Coleridge took me over to All-Foxden . . . where Wordsworth lived. . . . Wordsworth himself was from home, but his sister kept house, and set before us a frugal repast; and we had free access to her brother's poems, the *Lyrical Ballads*, which were still in manuscript. . . .

In the outset of life (and particularly at this time I felt it so) our imagination has a body to it. We are in a state between sleeping and waking, and have indistinct but glorious glimpses of strange shapes, and there is always something to come better than what we see. As in our dreams, the fullness of the blood gives warmth and reality to the coinage of the brain, so in youth our ideas are clothed, and fed, and pampered with our good spirits; we breathe thick with thoughtless happiness, the weight of future years presses on the strong pulses of the heart, and we repose with undisturbed faith in truth and good. As we advance, we exhaust our fund of enjoyment and of hope. We are no longer wrapped in lamb's-wool, lulled in Elysium. As we taste the pleasures of life, their spirit evaporates, the sense palls; and nothing is left but the phantoms, the lifeless shadows of what *has been!*

. . . The next day Wordsworth arrived from Bristol at Coleridge's cottage. I think I see him now. He an-

swered in some degree to his friend's description of him, but was more gaunt and Don Quixote-like. He was quaintly dressed . . . in a brown fustian jacket and striped pantaloons. There was something of a roll, a lounge in his gait, not unlike his own Peter Bell. There was a severe, worn pressure of thought about his temples, a fire in his eye (as if he saw something in objects more than the outward appearance), an intense high narrow forehead, a Roman nose, cheeks furrowed by strong purpose and feeling, and a convulsive inclination to laughter about the mouth, a good deal at variance with the solemn, stately expression of the rest of his face. . . . He sat down and talked very naturally and freely, with a mixture of clear gushing accents in his voice, a deep guttural intonation, and a strong tincture of the northern *burr*, like the crust on wine. He instantly began to make havoc of the half of a Cheshire cheese on the table. . . .

They all went over again to All-Foxden, and we hear them reading poetry aloud in the open air, and talking endlessly; and we see them sitting in the low latticed window, or in the garden, and again talking endlessly, and we hear that Coleridge likes to compose walking over uneven ground, or breaking through the straggling branches of a copse wood: whereas Wordsworth always wrote, if he could, 'walking up and down a straight gravel path, or in some spot where the continuity of his verse met with no collateral interruption.'

Then they left Dorothy behind, and set off on a walking tour down the coast to Lynton, staying in sweet country inns, and listening to the fisher-folk, and talking away among themselves as hard as ever. When they returned, Hazlitt set out for his home again, and Coleridge for Germany, and the scenes fade out. . . . For a moment Lamb looks in and makes a remark, and then the essay ends.

The reader is so caught up and carried along by the

writing, that it is not until the whole is analyzed and anatomized that we realize the brilliance of the artistry with which its varied strands are knit together, its varied emotions fused into a unity of effect. It appeals to so much of the total human consciousness: to purely intellectual interests, to dramatic emotions, to the sense of common curiosity, to reverence and admiration, to laughter and pity, to eye and ear and physical sensation, and to the ache in the heart of every human being who has lost his youth and its dreams.

## §

IT IS time to say something of the greatest artist among English essay-writers—Charles Lamb. It would be interesting to work out a comparison between his essay on *Old China* and Hazlitt's *My First Acquaintance with Poets*, and to note in detail the different methods of two artists, with widely different personalities, dealing with something of the same sort of theme. Both create extraordinarily living figures and both intertwine the past and the present to gain a particular effect. Lamb writes in a mood of comedy, Hazlitt in one of disillusion; Lamb uses the dramatic method, Hazlitt the descriptive; and each essay is a masterpiece of its kind. But something more general must be said of Lamb.

I suspect there are times when all readers who do not regard Lamb as 'Saint Charles' find his exaggerated 'quaintness' irritating; when his description of his own writings as 'villainously prank't in an affected array of antique modes and phrases,' seems justly to sum up their weakness; when his so carefully created personality palls. But these are definitely, I think, some of those occasions when the reader is at fault, when 'habit and lethargy have dulled his palate.' For to come freshly and without prejudice to Lamb is to confess that, within the

limits of the essay, he is perfection. This perfection is partly the result of a unique temperament, partly the effect of a unique kind of learning and thinking, and partly sheer technical mastery of his medium. One great element in his success is the tangibility, the concreteness of the world he creates. Lamb is sometimes spoken of as if he were a shy, elusive, almost dim figure. He was, of course, shy and retiring in life; he stammered and was insignificant-looking; he hated publicity and 'occasions.' But there is no one who is more clearly embodied in his writing. There the outline of his own figure is clean-edged, firm and sure, projected in the round, unlike the figure of anybody else; significant, unique.

In proportion as the years both lessen and shorten, I set more count upon their periods, and would fain lay my ineffectual finger upon the spoke of the great wheel. I am not content to pass away, 'like a weaver's shuttle.' Those metaphors solace me not, nor sweeten the unpalatable draught of mortality. I care not to be carried with the tide, that smoothly bears human life to eternity; and reluct at the inevitable course of destiny. I am in love with this green earth; the face of town and country; the unspeakable rural solitudes, and the sweet security of streets. I would set up my tabernacle here. I am content to stand still at the age to which I am arrived; I, and my friends: to be no younger, no richer, no handsomer. I do not want to be weaned by age; or drop, like mellow fruit, as they say, into the grave.—Any alteration, on this earth of mine, in diet or in lodging, puzzles and discomposes me. My household-gods plant a terrible fixed foot, and are not rooted up without blood. They do not willingly seek Lavinian shores. A new state of being staggers me.

Sun, and sky, and breeze, and solitary walks, and summer holidays, and the greenness of fields, and the delicious juices of meats and fishes, and society, and the cheerful glass, and candle-light, and fireside conversa-



tions, and innocent vanities, and jests, and *irony itself*—do these things go out with life?

Can a ghost laugh, or shake his gaunt sides, when you are pleasant with him?

And you, my midnight darlings, my Folios! must I part with the intense delight of having you (huge arm-fuls) in my embraces? Must knowledge come to me, if it come at all, by some awkward experiment of intuition, and not linger by this familiar process of reading?

We know Lamb as perhaps we know no other writer of essays. The precision and clarity and grace of his presentation of himself delight the sensuous imagination everywhere. We have glimpses of the childhood of some of the other essayists, of Cowley, of Steele, of Hazlitt, but we know none of them as we know the child Elia. We see him turning over the pages of the old illustrated Bible, putting his fingers through the picture of the Ark, and shuddering over the Witch of Endor calling up Samuel: we see him at the rapture of his first play, or reading Cowley in the hot window seat of the store-room at Blakesmoor, with the hum and flapping of the solitary wasp; we know him wandering in the green lanes at Mackery End, or as a schoolboy bathing all day long, like an otter, in the New River at Newington.

It is with the same clear outline that the reader sees his relations and friends, his own adult life, and indeed, everything his pen touches—Captain Jackson helping himself cheerfully to cheese-rind, or Mrs. Battle sitting bolt upright with her cards; Bridget Elia slicing French beans, or the tired little chimney-sweep asleep on the freshly laundered aristocratic sheets. But the extreme clarity of outline with which we see everything that Lamb wants us to see, is perhaps inclined to make us forget that there are a number of things which he does not wish us to see. We know him so well where we do know him, that we take no account of the gaps in our knowl-

edge. But Lamb never speaks about himself in the way Hazlitt, for instance, does: we are completely ignorant of what he really thinks or of what he really feels about his own life, and its course and its conditions.

Nevertheless, we find more of a complete man in the essays of Elia than in any other English essays. We have his finely cut, keen and original mind, his leaping freakish nonsense, his tenderness, his irrational prejudices, his myriad moods of grave and gay. Like almost all great artists Lamb has created an unmistakable world of his own in his art. His style composes, as it were, a new element, in which we live and move and breathe while we read him; an atmosphere which is formed by that peculiar and unique use of language of his, and which seals the reader from the familiar and commonplace. Words are his slaves. There is never the slightest danger in Lamb of the atmosphere being dispersed by his lack of the skill to sustain it. There is no blurring or feebleness or fumbling. He can make his instrument communicate exactly what he wishes it to, whether he is criticizing the tragedies of Shakespeare, or wandering through Oxford in the vacation, or describing a poor relation. His language can be as sumptuous and sonorous as Milton or as simple as Steele, and his power of enlarging his effects with the subtleties and suggestion of quotation and allusion might be compared with that modern master of the same art, Mr. T. S. Eliot.

## §

THERE are very few essayists whose creation of personality can be spoken of in the same breath with Lamb. Some create mannerisms by which we recognize them easily, some—Macaulay and Pater and G. K. Chesterton, for example—have a peculiar character of mind which stamps everything they write and gives it a vi-


talities of its own, but that is not the same thing as the creative egotism of the pure essayist. The only modern writer who touches that particular quality is Max Beerbohm. His essays have not the width and variety of Lamb; he has none of Lamb's vast reading, his marrowy meditative vein, his direct humanity. He is detached, sophisticated in his simplicity, sly and very quiet in his humor and wit. The unity of his work is not the unifying of a wide diversity of moods into one personality, but rather the unifying of a whole personality into a single mood. The tone of his voice never changes, but it is an individual voice of great polish and distinction.

It is not easy (says Hazlitt) to write a familiar style. Many people mistake a familiar for a vulgar style, and suppose that to write without affectation is to write at random. On the contrary, there is nothing that requires more precision, and, if I may so say, purity of expression, than the style I am speaking of. . . . It is not to throw words together in any combination we please, but to follow and avail ourselves of the true idiom of the language.

There could not be a better description of the writing of Max Beerbohm. It reads as if it were the easiest thing in the world, but no one else has done it. His great talent in that style is the character sketch and the anecdote, and it must, I think, be noticeable to all readers, that it is undeniable that the more the essay tends towards biography, autobiography or fiction, the better we are pleased. The pure exploitation of personality is a ticklish business. As Montaigne says:

"Tis a rugged road, more so than it seems, to follow a pace so rambling and uncertain, as that of the soul; . . . to choose and lay hold of so many little nimble motions.

The soul, indeed, is so elusive and so difficult to capture in words that it almost always escapes, and either leaves the mind to comment, or has its place taken by a trivial and wordy egotism. The mind produces articles and treatises and critical essays which appeal to other minds, and provide intellectual stimulus, but a second-rate egotism produces that most tedious of all poor literature—the poor essay. And the fact that the average reader does, undoubtedly, find essays in general dull reading, leads us to an inescapable conclusion: the conclusion that the essay does not today satisfy many of the needs which literature does satisfy, or at any rate does not satisfy them nearly so well as either biography or fiction.



## LYRIC POETRY

‘**P**OETRY,’ says Shelley, ‘is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds.’ There is a multitude of definitions of poetry, no single one of them satisfactory or conclusive, but this one, if it is not comprehensive, does at any rate suggest the most important qualities in poetry. And those qualities are, that it has the power ‘to soothe the cares and lift the thoughts of man’; that it lifts his heart too, and brings a sense of gladness and fineness and ‘rightness’—the sense which made the essentially prosaic Arnold Bennett note in his journal; ‘I find that if I am writing a novel or story, the finest English verse has the capacity to lift me up out of the rut of composition and set me, and my work, on a higher plane. In other words, it inspires.’

The art of prose is apt to be a practical art. Its roots are in the familiar world of daily life. It comes to us generally with some ulterior aim, and seeks to argue, to explain, to exhort, to tell a story. It is seldom quite disinterested, and if it is, it is apt to be dull. Poetry can, and may, do all the things that prose does, but it does something else as well; it has a world of its own, and

still will keep

A bower quiet for us, and a sleep

Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.

It is not that there are certain subjects which belong only to poetry: there are no subjects which cannot be beautifully presented in prose, but they are presented

in a different *way* in poetry. There is seldom any mystery about prose. The effect is there, and we can analyze its perfection and give a good reason for it. But the beauty of poetry is far more elusive and indefinite. The perfect essay is a triumph, but the perfect lyric is a miracle. ✓

This mysterious element in poetry is so universally felt, that many critics prefer to make no effort to explain it. Even Dr. Johnson, with his passion for the concrete illustration, could find nothing adequate to say about poetry, and confessed his inadequacy by an analogy: 'We all know what light is, but it is not easy to tell what it is.' Coleridge went so far as to declare that poetry is enjoyed best when it is not fully understood, and Professor A. E. Housman is driven to apply a physical test and to say that poetry is what brings the tears to his eyes. But that does not get us very much further. Boswell tells us that it brought tears to the eyes of Dr. Johnson to read a poem by Dr. Beattie called *The Hermit*, and to know that Milton's *Nymphs and shepherds, dance no more* has the same effect on Professor Housman, tells us a good deal about the differences between Dr. Johnson and Professor Housman, but very little about the nature of poetry.

Is there really nothing but the subjective test, and must we be content to say that poetry is simply what we feel intuitively to be poetry?

This is, of course, what we really do with any artistic experience, and there is no thermometer which will test the true heat of the poetic fire. Whatever we judge in terms of 'beauty' is bound to be a subjective judgment. When we say a thing is beautiful, we mean that it produces a certain effect *in ourselves*. But that effect on the whole human consciousness is not analogous to the effect, say, of eating a meal on the human stomach. The stomach is an organ of certain dimensions and certain

capacities, and the effects produced on each individual by presenting material to it are easily ascertained and have permanently fixed limitations. But the human consciousness works in an infinitely more complicated fashion. It is a plastic, shifting thing; it has the most remarkable capacities for growth and expansion. That coördination of its total faculties, that fulfillment of the spirit, that amplifying and sensitizing of all our responses, or whatever we choose to call our experience of 'beauty,' is never rigid and final. The more we live, the more we read, and (I am sure) the more we examine our reading, the deeper and wider and finer become our capacities for poetic experience. An attempt to understand what poetry brings to us, the discipline of reading intelligently as well as intuitively, make us enjoy poetry more, and hence whatever final mystery we may find ourselves confronted with, it seems a profitable, as well as a very fascinating, occupation, to try to find out, in part at least, on what our intuitive perceptions rest.

## §

FIRST of all we do know that however mysterious the nature and effect of poetry may be, it is, in fact, created by the poet's use of words: there is no other way in which it *can* be created. It must depend on his choice of words; on all the trailing and reverberating associations they bring with them; on the sound of the chime and concord of their vowels and consonants; on the way they influence one another in tone and quality and value; on the movement and flow the poet gives them. Critics all down the ages have made attempt after attempt to define poetry. They have coined high-sounding phrases and used a wealth of abstract terms, but we can, perhaps, come closer to the realities of poetry by

examining a little its particular use of the medium common to all literature—the medium of language—than by a great deal of transcendental talk about Truth and Beauty, the Divine and the Infinite. We need not be afraid that ‘we murder to dissect.’ Poetry is living, sturdy stuff: it will bear a deal of looking into.

There are fashions in poetry as in everything else. If we meet the four following stanzas, we can assign them at once to the Elizabethan age, the eighteenth century, the nineteenth century, and the present day, without any hesitation.

Her cheeks are like the blushing cloud  
 That beautifies Aurora's face,  
 Or like the silver crimson shroud  
 That Phoebus' smiling looks doth grace:  
 Heigh ho, fair Rosaline!  
 Her lips are like two budded roses  
 Whom ranks of lilies neighbour nigh,  
 Within whose bounds she balm encloses  
 Apt to entice a deity:  
 Heigh ho, would she were mine!

---

Hail, beauteous stranger of the grove!  
 Thou messenger of Spring!  
 Now Heaven repairs thy rural seat,  
 And woods thy welcome ring.

---

Sweet in her green dell the flower of beauty slumbers,  
 Lull'd by the faint breezes sighing through her hair;  
 Sleeps she and hears not the melancholy numbers  
 Breath'd to my sad lute 'mid the lonely air.

---

We know  
 war and its dead, and famine's bleached bones;  
     black rot overreaching  
     the silent pressure of life  
         in fronds  
 of green ferns and in the fragile shell of white flesh.



But though the minor poetry of the past usually contains an alloy of fashion which may interfere with the direct enjoyment of it, great lyric poetry is more timeless than any other form of literature. The great prose-writer, even Boswell, even Fielding, delights us *in spite of* the strangeness of his world and the presentation of his material. The epic, the narrative, the satiric poet, sets out to please a special audience in a special period, and has, therefore, an element which confines him to a certain time and space. But the great lyric poet sings of his experience in the world of dateless emotions; of love and death and nature and childhood, of eternal dreams and eternal questionings. The issue lies simply between his personality and words.

Poetry is a special use of words. The very sight of words arranged in short lines on the page immediately prepares us to receive a different effect from those words than the effect we receive from a page of prose. Our problem is, what is this effect?

As we have said, it is something which removes us automatically from the humdrum atmosphere of daily life, in a way in which even the best essay or novel does not. The words in the lines may be those we use a hundred times a day, but their values have suddenly become transformed. And this is true even if we feel that the poetry is only mediocre.

Love guards the roses of thy lips  
 And flies about them like a bee;  
 If I approach he forward skips,  
 And if I kiss he stingeth me.

Lo, thro' her works gay nature grieves  
 How brief she is and frail,  
 As ever o'er the falling leaves  
 Autumnal winds prevail.  
 Yet still the philosophic mind

Consolatory food can find,  
 And hope her anchorage maintain:  
 We never are deserted quite;  
 'Tis by succession of delight  
 That love supports his reign.

---

Music, when soft voices die,  
 Vibrates in the memory;  
 Odours, when sweet violets sicken,  
 Live within the sense they quicken.

Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,  
 Are heap'd for the beloved's bed;  
 And so thy thoughts, when thou art gone,  
 Love itself shall slumber on.

These examples, even the last, are all minor poetry, but they are poetry. They are all commonplace in subject matter, but just to say the lines over produces a pleasure which prose can never give.

The framework of metre and rhyme by itself isolates the thought in a poem from contaminating relationships with everyday affairs; it heightens the pitch slightly, even in poor poetry. But the actual beginning of the pleasure I believe to be simply the satisfaction of the formal design of the thought in the line pattern: a pleasure of successful arrangement and orderliness, of neatness and adequacy of language, of compactness and logical structure. But not only is the experience lifted out of the practical world and condensed in a pleasant symmetrical way, but the words are made to *move* in a way which gives them more power and beauty than they have in a prose movement: that is, they create that delight which is by far the widest, though not the most intense, delight of poetry—the pleasure of *rhythm*.

Rhythm (the Greek word means 'flow'), is not, of course, the prerogative of poetry. Indeed, all language

which is deeply moving and memorable has the element of swinging movement in it. There are certain prose rhythms which are so regular in their pattern that they are half-way to poetry in the way they affect us: the prose of the Irish peasants as presented by Synge, for instance.

They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me . . . I'll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the other. . . . I won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening.

Or again, prose can have a splendor and dignity in its movement which lifts us above the practical world just as poetry does.

O eloquent, just and mighty Death! whom none could advise thou hast persuaded; what none hath dared thou hast done; and whom all the world hath flattered, thou hast cast out of the world and despised: thou hast drawn together all the far-stretched greatness, all the pride, cruelty and ambition of man, and covered it all over with these two narrow words, *Hic jacet*.

These rhythms are exquisite, and the rhythms of free verse can be exquisite too, but their effect can never be the same effect, or so powerful an effect, as that of the regular sound pattern which we associate with the word poetry. The poet who writes free verse cuts himself off deliberately from one great source of his power—the primitive and profound emotional value of a recurrent rhythm. He declares that the *really* important rhythm of the poem is the 'organic' rhythm, the individual, personal, emotional and intellectual flow of the experience which the words communicate, and that this cannot fit

itself to an artificial form, but must create its own verbal pattern to express its own individual inward pattern; that, as D. H. Lawrence said, 'it is the hidden emotional pattern that makes poetry, not the obvious form. It doesn't depend on ear particularly, but on the sensitive soul.'

But this is only a half truth. Of course the effect of poetry is not on the ear alone. If it were, poetry in an unknown tongue would move us as much as that in a familiar one. Moreover, anything *very* melodious and with a very marked rhythm—poems such as Shelley's *Swiftly walk o'er the western wave*, or Tennyson's *Come down, O maid*, or Meredith's *Love in the valley*—very soon prove so soothing that the reader is merely rocked to sleep in a cradle of soft sounds. But, nevertheless, an enormous amount of poetry does delight us mainly for its pure singing quality.

I'll make your eyes like morning suns appear,  
     As mild, and fair;  
 Your brow as crystal smooth, and clear,  
     And your dishevell'd hair  
 Shall flow like a calm region of the air.

---

Cowslips seize upon the fallow,  
     And the cardamine in white,  
 Where the corn-flow'rs join the mallow,  
     Joy and health, and thrift unite.

---

There's not a bonnie flower that springs  
     By fountain, shaw or green;  
 There's not a bonnie bird that sings,  
     But minds me o' my Jean.

---

The moon, like a flower,  
 In heaven's high bower,  
 With silent delight  
 Sits and smiles on the night.

It is no use being solemn and soulful about poetry like this. Its 'obvious form' is a great part of its charm.

But even when we do come to more serious poetry, this 'obvious form' need be no stumbling block to the full expression of the sensitive soul. Indeed, the history of poetry is in itself sufficient proof that it is not. The rhythms of great poetry, however much they have been conditioned by a regular sound pattern, have never found themselves fettered by it. They have the individuality of the waves of the sea, which we think of loosely in terms of a regular rise and fall, but which have an infinite variety of movement. As Ruskin, with his usual precision of observation, pointed out in *Modern Painters*, it is more exact to speak of waves changing, than of their rising and falling, though that is what they *appear* to do. A wave really goes on and on 'now lower, now higher, now tossing its mane like a horse, now building itself together like a wall, now shaking, now steady,' but still the same wave. And we can mark its individual pattern best against the obvious form of the conventional idea of a simple rise and fall. So it is with the rhythms of the great poet. The hidden emotional pattern is the individual design of the wave, and the originality of that is emphasized more clearly against the pulse of a traditional rhythm, than if it is left to be heard alone. We have only to think, for example, of the infinite variety of personal rhythms which have been executed within the fourteen decasyllabic lines of the conventional sonnet form, and to contrast this with the small number of free verse forms which are really memorable, to realize that freedom can very well be 'the weight of too much liberty' where poetry is concerned.

Moreover, the 'obvious form' can, and does, play a very positive part in the working of the creative imagination. The metre, and in rhyming verse, the rhyme scheme, is not a rigid mold into which the raw material

of the poem is to be forced, it is a framework which conditions the limit of the thought which it is to contain, just as a site conditions the limits of a building which is to be constructed on it. The character of the framework can provide a positive inspiration to the poet for the manipulation of his experience, just as the character of a site has frequently proved a positive inspiration to an architect. The demands of a framework can call forth concentration or ornament, line or color, swell, suspense or finality: it can enrich and fulfill inspiration as much as it confines it.

The eternal quest of the poet is to find the perfect balance and adjustment between thought and form, between sense and sound. The fact that he is a poet means that he must communicate his experience through a rhythmical use of language. He has to manipulate and weld words into a sound pattern which shall be the verbal equivalent of the living power of his own thought and feeling; which shall make it fully conscious, as it were, and distill its own unique quality. The most obvious examples of this are poems which are creations of emotional mood. It can be seen very well in this stanza by Charlotte Brontë.

To toil, to think, to long, to grieve,—  
Is such my future fate?  
The morn was dreary; must the eve  
Be also desolate?  
Well, such a life at least makes Death  
A welcome, wished-for friend;  
Then, aid me, Reason, Patience, Faith  
To suffer to the end!

Charlotte Brontë was never more than a second-rate poet, but the matching of mood and expression is here perfect. The deadness, the dreariness of the emotion is transmitted in a dullness, a flatness and tonelessness of language which is its very echo.

But as an illustration of a great poet at work on the same problem take the first verse of Keats's *Ode to Autumn*.

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,  
 Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;  
 Conspiring with him how to load and bless  
 With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;  
 To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,  
 And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;  
 To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells  
 With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,  
 And still more, later flowers for the bees,  
 Until they think warm days will never cease,  
 For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.

The poet's imagination is brimming with thoughts, feelings and sensations of the richness, the fertility, the fulfillment of autumn, and every line and every word of the description call this into being. The slow, peaceful movement of the rhythm, the whole verse one long, lingering sentence, gathering a wealth of picture and impression as it flows—of mist and sunshine, of laden orchards and cottage gardens, of plenty and soft serenity, and mature consummation. The whole effect created by words which by their associations and by their sound (particularly by the subtle use of the letter *l*), call up every suggestion of warmth and abundance and tranquillity: 'bosom-friend,' 'maturing sun,' 'moss'd cottage-trees,' 'sweet kernel,' 'mellow fruitfulness,' 'load and bless,' 'swell,' 'plump,' 'apples,' 'clammy cells.'

Or again, the poet may invoke the tone and color and unique flavor of the experience which he is communicating by his use of *images*. In the second verse of the *Ode to Autumn* Keats does this by the creation of an unforgettable series of pictures in which the spirit of the season is incarnated into living figures; and the

great poet can almost always be known by his power to evoke picture and sensation from illustrative images.

Sweet Spenser, moving through his clouded heaven,  
With the moon's beauty and the moon's soft pace.

Helen, thy beauty is to me  
Like those Nicean barks of yore  
That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,  
The weary way-worn wanderer bore  
To his own native shore.

Or that wonderful simile Keats found to describe the loneliness and dreariness of the fallen Titans.

like a dismal cirque  
Of Druid stones upon a forlorn moor,  
When the chill rain begins at shut of eve  
In dull November.

Words can indeed do wonderful things. Once put into short lines on a page, they take on a new vitality, a sharpening of value, a secret potency, which they never have in prose. They may be perfectly commonplace words of one syllable,

If yet I have not all thy love  
Dear, I shall never have it all . . .

but they suddenly leap into significance by the way they fall into sequence; or they suddenly startle by an unexpected contrast,

A bracelet of bright hair about the bone  
or hang pulsing in the air long after they have ceased to sound,

Triumphing over Death, and Chance, and thee O Time.  
or create a vision by the very negation of it,

No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat  
Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming.



or pack a revelation into an epithet, 'the silver snarling trumpets,' the 'slow-chapt power' of Time.

Nor need the words have had any former poetic associations. A colorless or even an ugly word may become significant, and sound inevitable, in poetry.

The grave's a fine and *private* place,  
But none, I think, do there embrace.

*Batter* my heart, three personed God . . .

### §

BUT great poetry obviously does not depend on verbal rhythms alone, or on verbal felicities such as these, which, beautiful though they are, can be easily analyzed. Most of these effects come from that 'fundamental brain work' which Rossetti declared to be so necessary to poetry. There is no mystery in them, they are just living and lovely. But there are certain emotional experiences created by poetry which are more rare, and which it is much more difficult to analyze. They arise from the poet's possession of a faculty of experience which is his especial and essential gift. For the poet not only expresses his experience in a different way from the writer of prose, but the experience itself is different, and comes to him differently.

We all know the animating, revealing gift of the poet, his power to 'stab the spirit broad awake'; 'Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar.' The poet, too, has the faculty of identifying himself with other modes of being than his own. Keats gives an example when he describes himself lying awake and listening to the rain 'with a sense of being drowned and rotted like a grain of wheat.' But it is not the mere fact of having extraordinary delicacy of sensibility which

makes the poet, for a writer of prose can have that too. Dorothy Wordsworth in her journal, for instance, shows every bit as much intensity and vividness of observation and feeling as her brother does in his poems. But what distinguishes the great poet peculiarly is a power of *relating* perceptions, of synthesizing them, of arresting and transforming them by a mysterious alchemy of fusion. Blake called this power 'spiritual sensation'; D. H. Lawrence felt it as something beyond his own identity, 'Not I, but the wind that blows through me'; Shelley said it acts 'in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness.' The supreme moments of the great poet are shafts of inspiration, a kind of happy and intoxicated recklessness, when he creates in the sense and sound and associations and apposition of a few words, a fusing of abstract and concrete, of thought and sensation, of emotion and vision.

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
 To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
 While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad  
     In such an ecstasy!  
 Still would'st thou sing, and I have ears in vain—  
 To thy high requiem become a sod.

---

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
 Within his bending sickle's compass come;  
 Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
 But bears it out even to the edge of doom:—

---

Tyger, Tyger! burning bright  
 In the forests of the night,  
 What immortal hand and eye,  
 Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

---

A slumber did my spirit seal;  
 I had no human fears:

She seemed a thing that could not feel  
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;  
She neither hears nor sees;  
Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course,  
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

It is moments such as these which are the peaks of poetry: when, as Robert Bridges says, the poet seems to concentrate all the far-reaching resources of language on one point, and the most expectant and exacting imagination is astonished and satisfied. And this sense of the highest, swiftest, purest flight of the spirit can be created as much by the most utter simplicity of language as by the most rich and complex:

*Nurse's Song*

When the voices of children are heard on the green,  
And laughing is heard on the hill,  
My heart is at rest within my breast,  
And everything else is still.

'Then come home, my children, the sun is gone down,  
And the dews of night arise;  
Come, come, leave off play, and let us away  
Till the morning appears in the skies.'

'No, no, let us play, for it is yet day,  
And we cannot go to sleep;  
Besides, in the sky the little birds fly,  
And the hills are all cover'd with sheep.'

'Well, well, go and play till the light fades away,  
And then go home to bed.'  
The little ones leaped and shoutèd and laugh'd  
And all the hills echoèd.

It is pure poetry like that which is the ultimate mystery: poems which are

still the unimaginable lodge  
For solitary thinkings; such as dodge  
Conception to the very bourne of heaven.

Directly we read the first verse Time and Space are annihilated. It is no actual village green, no actual nurse, no actual hill, no actual evening that is there. We are caught up into a moment of pure disembodied love and joy and peace, which has been created in us by four lines of the very simplest words imaginable. There is no mention of any of the emotions themselves which flood the heart brimful of feeling: those have sprung up by the poet's use of symbols, they are in the laughter and play of the children; in the tenderness and simplicity of the nurse; in the stillness. And this world of pure feeling which has been created in the first four lines is sustained, and made more clear and firm in outline by the transference to the simple human pictures of the actual children, and by all the sweet and happy and peaceful associations of common natural beauties—sunshine and morning, skies and birdsong, hills and the fading evening light.

Criticism can do something towards describing pure poetry: poetry where

without much incident or many characters, and with little wit, wisdom or arrangement, a number of bright pictures are presented to the imagination, and a fine feeling expressed of those mysterious relations by which visible external things are assimilated with inward thoughts and emotions, and become the images and exponents of all passions and affections.

But the words of criticism seem heavy, almost suffocating, beside pure lyric poetry. It is, after all, poetry itself which must bring its own joy, waking the senses, freshening the heart, 'calling the lapsèd Soul.'



## BIOGRAPHY

MONTAIGNE tells us that he loved especially to read in 'those that write lives,' for, he says, 'man in general, the knowledge of whom I hunt after, does there appear more lively and entire than anywhere besides: the variety and truth of his internal qualities in gross and piece-meal, the diversity of means by which he is united and knit, and the accidents that threaten him.' But to the present-day reader it appears that there is extremely little of those qualities for which Montaigne declares he enjoyed reading biography, in any work of the sort written by his day, and that he must have supplied most of the psychological interest he found, out of his own acute insight into the possibilities of such a form of writing. Even the word 'biography' was not invented in Montaigne's day. It was not used until 1683, when Dryden invented it to describe the work of Plutarch. Montaigne calls the writers of 'lives,' 'historians,' and biography had no standing of its own as a literary form. Any description of the variety and truth of a man's internal qualities, and of the diversity of means by which he is united and knit, were strictly subordinate to his importance as a symptom in an historical situation, and described only with an eye to illustrating that.

It was strange that the new interest in human psychology which flooded the civilized world during the Renaissance era did not produce in abundance a writing of 'lives,' but in England that interest concentrated itself in poetry and drama, and though a few biographies were published—of which the most interesting is the

life of Cardinal Wolsey by George Cavendish—it remained a very minor literary form. Nor was very much progress made in the seventeenth century, though John Aubrey's collection of anecdotes and descriptive details about famous men is a landmark in the development of biography. It illustrated the immense value of 'actuality' in any good biographical work, of the noting of characteristic detail such as those, for instance, which Aubrey relates about Hobbes.

In his old age he used to sing prick-song every night (when all were gone and sure nobody could hear him) for his health, which he did believe would make him live two or three years longer.

In his old age he was very bald; yet within door, he used to study and sit bare-headed, and said he never took cold in his head, but that the greatest trouble was to keep off the flies from pitching on the baldness.

But there was one book published in the last half of the century which was of far more importance than Aubrey in the history of biography. John Bunyan was imprisoned in Bedford Jail in November, 1660, and some time during the twelve years he spent in prison, he wrote an autobiographical sketch called *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, which remains one of the most fascinating psychological studies ever written. In it, Bunyan describes, in the most vivid and picturesque language, the story of his conversion, of the struggles of his spirit through various phases of doubt and difficulty, and of his final achievement of perfect faith, on a certain night when, as he says, 'I could scarce lie in my bed for joy and peace and triumph.'

Bunyan's relation of what he calls the work of God upon his soul, is told in a way all his own.

I could have stepped into a style much higher than this, in which I have here discoursed, and could have

adorned all things more than here I have seemed to do, but I dare not; God did not play in tempting of me; neither did I play, when I sunk as into the bottomless pit, when the pangs of hell caught hold upon me; wherefore I may not play in relating of them, but be plain and simple and lay down the thing as it was.

It is this plainness and simplicity which is so extraordinarily compelling.

While I was thus considering, and being put to a plunge about it, the tempter came in with this delusion, that there was no way for me to know I had faith but by trying to work some miracles. . . . Nay, one day, as I was between Elstow and Bedford, the temptation was hot upon me to try if I had faith by doing some miracle; which miracle at this time was this, I must say to the puddles that were in the horse-pads, Be dry; and to the dry places, Be you puddles: and truly one time I was going to say so indeed; but just as I was about to speak this thought came into my mind, 'But go under yonder hedge and pray first, that God would make you able.' But when I had concluded to pray, this came hot upon me: That if I prayed, and came again, and tried to do it, and yet did nothing notwithstanding, then to be sure I had no faith, but was a cast-away, and lost; nay, thought I, if it be so, I will not try yet, but will stay a little longer.

In these days, when I have heard others talk of what was the sin against the Holy Ghost, then would the tempter so provoke me to desire that sin, that I was as if I could not, must not, neither should be quiet until I had committed it. . . . If it were to be committed by speaking of such a word, then I have been as if my mouth would have spoken that word, whether I would or no; and in so strong a measure was this temptation upon me, that often I have been ready to clap my hands under my chin, to hold my mouth from opening; and to that end also I have had thoughts at other times to

leap with my head downward into some muck-hole or other, to keep my mouth from speaking.

Incident after incident is presented in the form of a direct dramatic dialogue between himself and Satan.

Then hath the tempter come upon me with such discouragements as these: You are very hot for mercy, but I will cool you . . . many have been as hot as you for a spurt, but I have quenched their zeal. . . . Then, thought I, I am glad this comes into my mind: well, I will watch and take what care I can. Though you do (said Satan), I shall be too hard for you; I will cool you insensibly—by degrees, by little and little. What care I (saith he), though I be seven years in chilling your heart, if I can do it at last? Continual rocking will lull a crying child asleep: . . . Though you be burning hot at present, I can pull you from this fire; I shall have you cold before it be long.

'Oh! many a pull hath my heart had with Satan,' he exclaims, and every detail of his 'tugging and striving,' of his combats and conflicts, his sinkings and despairs, and his flashes of hope: all the darkness and terrors, all the emptiness and heartache are revealed with that direct, concrete imagery, and vigorous familiar speech which was afterwards to make *The Pilgrim's Progress* one of the immortal books of the world. We see his life, hung in doubt before him, 'not knowing which way to tip'; or his soul, like 'a child that was fallen into a mill-pit, who, though it could make some shift to scramble and sprawl in the water, yet, because it could find no hold for hand or foot, therefore at last it must die in that condition': or again, peace comes for a while, 'and methought I saw as if the tempter did leer and steal away from me, as being ashamed of what he had done.'

All this is a revelation of how the workings of the human spirit can be laid bare, and of how a personality



can be created by the skilful selection of episode and dialogue. But Bunyan had no successors, and his instinctive and simple art stands alone in his own day. It was not until Dryden, at the end of the century, defined biography as 'the history of particular men's lives,' that he conferred on it the dignity of an independent literary form, and indicated the whole of its future development up to the present day. Biography, he says, differs from history:

the pageantry of life is taken away: you see the poor reasonable animal as naked as ever nature made him: are made acquainted with his passions and his follies: and find the demi-god a man.

The whole character of eighteenth-century society fostered an interest in such a form of writing as this. The rapidly increasing reading public no longer had the Elizabethan love of 'the pageantry of life,' and the literature written for that public no longer supplied pictures of it. Essays and novels concerned themselves with new fields: with the lives and problems of 'the poor reasonable animal,' with all the infinite varieties of his genus, and with the actual practical details of his daily existence and environment. It was very natural, therefore, that the lives of the dead should be written in the same spirit. The new ideals of writing, too, encouraged clarity and coherence of statement, and all the qualities of arrangement and order particularly necessary for biographical writing. There are three books which are landmarks in the history of the new form: Roger North's lives of his three brothers (published between 1740 and 1744), Johnson's *Life of Savage* (1744), and Mason's *Life and Letters of Gray* (1774). North introduced passages from letters and diaries, seeing their importance as 'images of interior thought,' and Mason was really the pioneer who pointed the way for Boswell. His

biography was almost entirely a collection of Gray's own letters, with explanatory notes by himself, and he writes in defence of it:

The method in which I have arranged the foregoing pages has, I trust, one degree of merit—that it makes the reader so well acquainted with the man himself as to render it totally unnecessary to conclude the whole with his character.

The book would have had an even greater degree of merit, however, if Mason had not falsified the text of the letters and omitted the passages with which he was not himself in agreement. It was a pity that he could not have heard Dr. Johnson on that topic:

The value of every story depends on its being true. A story is a picture either of an individual or of human nature in general: if it be false, it is a picture of nothing.

The writing of biography was perhaps the only kind of writing which Johnson himself really loved doing for its own sake. In his early days he never wrote anything (other than the life of Savage), except for money, and once he had his pension, he never wrote at all if he could help it. When Boswell and Goldsmith remonstrated with him about it, he declared:

No man is obliged to do as much as he can do. A man is to have part of his life to himself. Boswell. But I wonder, Sir, that you have not more pleasure in writing than in not writing. Johnson. Sir, you *may* wonder.

We feel quite sure that nothing but the idea of writing biography would have tempted him, at the age of sixty-eight, to undertake *The Lives of the Poets*, and the vigor and freshness of his work there speaks of the delight he took in it. It is full of good things, but nothing in it really equals the earlier *Life of Savage*, written

when he was thirty-five. It is a masterpiece. There, nearly two hundred years after the work of Cavendish, again we find a piece of writing which illustrates the two great essentials of all good biography. First, it is concerned exclusively with the faithful presentation of a personality; and secondly it is concerned to present that personality in the form of a work of conscious art.

## §

WHEN Montaigne tells of his love of 'lives,' he speaks as if it were the mere subject matter of men's lives which interested him so profoundly, and indeed, the satisfaction of common human curiosity will always be among the major interests of biography. It is the prime essential of any 'life' that it deals with a life which is worth writing about. Unless his subject is in some way remarkable, the author of a biography is helpless. He cannot go beyond his material. Thackeray can make an Arthur Pendennis the hero of a novel, because he can invent such incidents and create such environment about him, that the story of a weak and egotistical young nobody takes on a significance in which the intrinsic human importance of the central figure is immaterial. But if Pendennis were an historical figure, and we had nothing but his early poems in *The County Chronicle*, his letters to his mother and to Blanche Amory and to Warrington, his newspaper articles in *The Pall Mall Gazette*, and that famous novel *Walter Lorraine*, it would be a difficult task to make a fine biography of him. The subject of a biography *must* be an important, or in some way unusual, figure.

But that essential in the subject matter once granted, the merits of biography become a literary and artistic question: a question of *how it is done*. Harold Nicolson declares that the writing of biography requires nothing

but a particular form of talent, and that there is no biography which is a work of genius. In a sense, I suppose this is true. The biographer has no need of the power to create character, since that is already in his subject, and the very quality of his material—its almost inevitable limitation to documentary evidence—excludes so much of the emotional possibilities which the novelist or dramatist is free to create as he will. No one who really cares about biography wants it to develop in the direction in which it has strayed of recent years, where there is no strict line drawn between factual and imaginative truth, and where we never know whether we are reading words which the characters are known to have uttered, or conversations invented for them by the mind of the author. Inevitably the problems of the honest biographer are primarily those of synthesis and analysis, of selection and arrangement. Yet in spite of this, when Carlyle said that to write a good life was almost as hard as to live one, he made a gross understatement. It is quite clearly far, far harder. There are very few of us who could not point, even among our own acquaintance, to lives really well lived: but in the two hundred years since the publication of Johnson's *Life of Savage*, of lives really well written there have not been above one or two in a generation.

What, then, are the qualities necessary to the biographer, the qualities which are clearly so rare of attainment?

To preserve a becoming brevity—a brevity which excludes everything that is redundant and nothing that is significant—that, surely, is the first duty of a biographer. The second, no less surely, is to maintain his own freedom of spirit.

So Lytton Strachey, the greatest biographer of the present century, defined the aims which he himself was

seeking; and it is worth examining a little more closely what those aims imply.

To exclude everything that is redundant and nothing that is significant means that the essential literary quality in a good biography, as in any other work of art, is its *unity*, the relation of its parts to the whole. As Sir Edmund Gosse says, 'broad views are entirely out of place in biography, and there is perhaps no greater literary mistake than to attempt the "Life and Times" of a man. . . . Biography is a study sharply defined by two definite events, birth and death.' That the personality of the subject should shine out, clearly and firmly outlined, an unmistakable portrait, is obviously the central unity of a good biography. But the presentation of that complete and living portrait involves a supreme intellectual and emotional tact in the treatment of material. The complexity from which this ultimate unity is to emerge can be appalling. The human personality of even the dullest and most commonplace of us at any given moment is complex enough: five minutes of honest introspection are enough to convince us of that. But the biographer has not only to evoke truthfully the picture of a personality at any given moment, but he has to combine that with the sense of the value and importance of that moment in the whole growth and development, the final outline, of his central figure. Every detail of evidence, the record of every intellectual, emotional, practical experience that figure lived through, every mood and action, every thought and every human contact of which there is knowledge, must appear in just relationship of importance or unimportance to the whole. Time and space, age and environment, have to be living forces in the whole composition, as well as the multitude of intellectual ideas, and other human personalities which jostle each other as essential elements in it. Somehow, too, different planes of experience have

to be accounted for and brought into perspective. Again, we know ourselves, how many different characters each of us can be under the same skin. We are lover, friend, parent, child, or member of a committee: or we are ourselves, alone, reading a book, or day-dreaming. Each part we play has some rhythm of its own, its own *tempo* and movement; something which distinguishes the 'I' in that character from the 'I' which plays any of the others. As Walt Whitman says, 'Do I contradict myself? very well, I contradict myself, I contain multitudes.' The evidence of all these public and private and perhaps contradictory characters within the personality of his subject, must be taken account of by the biographer: somehow order must arise from this chaos, harmony from this concourse of independent melodies and discords.

To exclude everything that is redundant and nothing that is significant involves, then, the whole process of organization by which the complete unity and vitality of a personality is evoked from a mass of material—to achieve that is the first duty of the biographer. The second, says Strachey, is 'to maintain his own freedom of spirit,' and he goes on to explain what he means by that statement. 'It is not his business to be complimentary; it is his business to lay bare the facts of the case, as he understands them.'

We are apt to forget today, how revolutionary a statement of the ethics of biography Strachey was making when he wrote the preface to *Eminent Victorians* in 1918. By that time honesty in biography had fallen completely out of fashion, and Strachey found himself in exactly the same position as Johnson wrote from in *The Idler* of November 24th, 1750.

There are many who think it an act of piety to hide the faults or failings of their friends, even when they

can no longer suffer by their detection. We therefore see whole ranks of characters adorned with uniform panegyric, and not to be known from one another but by extrinsic and casual circumstances. . . . If we owe regard to the memory of the dead, there is yet more respect to be laid to knowledge, to virtue and to truth.

Or again, as he says in one of his most characteristic utterances:

Whether to see life as it is, will give us much consolation, I know not; but the consolation which is drawn from truth, if any there be, is solid and durable: that which may be derived from error, must be, like its original, fallacious and fugitive.

But a hundred years later no one who wrote biography any longer held that honest and excellent doctrine. 'How delicate, how decent is English biography, bless its mealy mouth! A Damocles sword of respectability hangs forever over the poor English life-writer . . . and reduces him to the verge of paralysis.' So Carlyle: while at the same time Tennyson was writing, 'What business has the public to know about Byron's wildnesses? He has given them fine work and they ought to be satisfied.' And the result is the typical Victorian 'life,' which was in spirit very much like numbers of lives written in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and now forgotten: stories based, not upon truth, but upon the commemorative instinct, and suppressing every fact and every opinion which did not accord with the general standard of greatness and goodness then current. Izaak Walton, for example, in the seventeenth century, wrote a series of charming 'Lives' of some of his contemporaries, in which Wotton and Donne, Hooker and Herbert all appear almost as gentle and kindly and quiet-loving as Walton himself, and with hardly any of the inconvenient passions and ambitions

and temperaments which characterized them in reality. Another example of the same thing is Mrs. Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*. It is a fascinating picture of the Brontës. The personalities of all the family are clear-cut and picturesque; the background and environment are most skilfully suggested; the scenes are full of dramatic emotion; the narrative is clear and flowing. It is the work of an artist, but of an artist in fiction. It is completely convincing, but a great deal of it happens to be untrue. Mrs. Gaskell quite deliberately omitted and altered and falsified evidence to obtain the effect she wanted, that is, to be 'complimentary' to Charlotte, and it was not, I think, until E. F. Benson published his *Charlotte Brontë* in 1932 that the complete facts were correctly stated.

The Victorian treatment of biography as if it were a branch of hagiology (the literature which deals with the lives of the saints), was weakened by the publication of Froude's *Carlyle*. Froude refused to be merely complimentary in his portrait of his hero, and portrayed him as a very living human being. Unfortunately, however, he too omitted and falsified documentary evidence when it did not agree with his own thesis, just as Mason had done in the eighteenth century, and it was not until the appearance of *Eminent Victorians* that what we now regard as the modern spirit in biography came into being.

## §

BUT Strachey's biographical creed contains an important qualification which we have not yet commented upon. He demanded from the biographer 'freedom of spirit' to set out the facts of the case, but it is the facts of the case 'as he understands them.' For biography, like all other forms of writing, is a collaboration—a collaboration between the material and the artist, and the



personality of the artist must inevitably color his art. It is all very well to talk about the 'facts,' but as Talleyrand said, there is nothing which can so easily be arranged as facts.

There will always be two 'schools' of biography, each of which works by a different method towards the same ideal. There is the type which was really invented by Mason, and of which Boswell is the finest example. Present-day illustrations of this type are the biographies of Keats by Amy Lowell and of Carlyle by D. A. Wilson. Then there is the type of which Johnson himself, and Lytton Strachey in the present day, are excellent examples. The aim of each is to evoke a personality, and to use all relevant material to do so, but their method of using material is different. One uses an impersonal approach, the other a personal. Boswell patiently collected a mass of direct evidence about his hero, and built up and arranged his material to convey to the reader the same solid portrait of Johnson that he carried in his own mind and heart. But that is the extent of his deliberate artistry. He did not attempt to affect the values of that portrait by any special standpoint from which he viewed his material, or by any deliberate coloring of his own personality. There was, of course, no question of his seeing Johnson from the standpoint of a world which held any values different from his own, for he and his hero belonged to the same world and held exactly the same principles about it. But in any case, Boswell was rightly unconcerned about the importance of his own personality, and it is very seldom that he consciously allows it to enter into his work at all, except in so far as it illustrates and clarifies that of Johnson.

This does not mean that the personality of Boswell is not an essential element in the *Life of Samuel Johnson*, for it is: but it is an unconscious element. Boswell often

appears in a most unattractive light in the glimpses we get of him in his own pages. He is vain, almost incredibly snobbish, malicious—how he loves to record anything derogatory Johnson ever says of Mrs. Thrale!—bumptious, and often completely fatuous—‘infidelity in a Highland gentleman appeared to me peculiarly offensive’!—But those who attack Boswell as a man and laud him as an artist, sometimes forget that it was his possession of certain human qualities, quite as much as of certain literary qualities, which make the ‘Life’ the book it is. His insatiable, insensitive curiosity, which makes us visualize him sometimes as an inquisitive bull-terrier, his general good-humor, and a certain stout streak of independence of mind in him, are invaluable for the reactions they produce in Johnson. But the most important thing about Boswell, the thing which swallows up everything else about him, was his plain human devotion to Johnson as a man—the facts that he would sit up talking with him all night when he himself wanted to go to bed; that he would accompany Johnson to Oxford when he himself wanted to stay in London and go to the Handel festival in Westminster Abbey; that he would give himself endless trouble to try to civilize the Hebrides for the sake of Johnson’s comfort, and would offer himself ungrudgingly as the butt for Johnson’s wit. And Johnson responded to this with a real love of Boswell. Clearly he often found him irritating, and often found him silly; but he loved him.

My regard for you is greater almost than I have words to express; but I do not choose to be always repeating it; write it down in the first leaf of your pocket book, and never doubt it again.

Do not neglect to write to me; for your kindness is one of the pleasures of my life.

I hold you, as Hamlet has it 'in my heart of hearts.'

Or there is that charming little scene of them both together in an inn bedroom in a small village in the north of Scotland:

After we had offered up our private devotions, and had chatted a little from our beds, Dr. Johnson said, 'God bless us both, for Jesus Christ's sake! Good night!'—I pronounced 'Amen.'—He fell asleep immediately.

It is this luminous sense of mutual affection and confidence which makes the spirit of Boswell's 'Life' unique. It enabled Boswell to be as frank and detailed about Johnson's defects as Johnson was about his. He suppresses nothing: Johnson's terrific and senseless prejudices, his rudeness, his occasional childish bursts of temper, his parochial-mindedness, his love of attention, and his ill-humor if he did not get enough of it, his descents to the cheapest of repartees, his horrible table manners. And yet, because of the love pervading the whole, all this leaves the sense of Johnson's real greatness and goodness quite unimpaired. It is that core of love in Boswell, too, which causes his whole picture of Johnson to be irradiated by a feeling of his innate sweetness of nature and simplicity of heart; the qualities in him which made his central faith that 'we are born for the comfort and succour of each other.' It is not so much the actual tale of his endless practical charities and generosityes, but the way in which Boswell manages to evoke the *manner* of Johnson's doing of a kindness, as, for example, when he secretly bribes Mrs. Williams' maid with an extra half-crown a week to stay with her mistress when she is old and sick and peevish: or the way he makes us hear the tones of Johnson's friendly voice:

Sir, I love the acquaintance of young people; because, in the first place, I don't like to think myself growing old. In the next place, young acquaintances must last longest, if they do last; and then, Sir, young men have more virtue than old men; they have more generous sentiments in every respect. I love the young dogs of this age, they have more wit and humour and knowledge of life than we had; but then the dogs are not so good scholars.

Boswell claimed in his preface that in his book Johnson would be seen more completely than any man who has ever lived, and his claim is amply justified. There is no biography in the world like Boswell's. This does not mean that it is necessary to be abject in admiration of it. It is impossible to read it through and not to feel, for instance, that it is longer than it need be. There are so many dull letters from Johnson, thanking friends for the loan of books, or naming the date of a journey, which could very well be omitted: nor do we need Boswell's own lengthy criticism of *The Lives of the Poets*; and the way in which he interrupts the narrative of the last few weeks of Johnson's life with an attack on Sir John Hawkins, and a collection of specimens of Johnson's style, and pauses, almost at the moment of his death, to apologize for his early lapses from virtue, are real artistic blemishes. But they do not make the book less unique. Boswell's great stroke of genius was in inventing a method of biography which was the ideal method for the biography of Johnson. Johnson lived in men's minds not as a great writer or a great thinker, or as the creator of any great national or artistic work, but as a Great Man, a concrete reality, someone to meet and listen to, someone to see and hear. And it is as a great man that he lives forever in the pages of Boswell. It is the actuality of him

which Boswell has managed to capture: the man himself as he dined with Wilkes or put pennies into the hands of sleeping children; as he hoarded orange peel or shuddered at the fear of death; as he sat with a pretty young Scots married woman on his knee, saying when she kissed him, 'Do it again, and let us see who will tire the first'; as he and Boswell walked arm in arm along the Strand and decided that upon the whole much more misery than happiness is caused by illicit commerce between the sexes; as he discussed the sermons of Mudge or Atterbury, or the acting of Garrick, or what he should do with a baby; or burst into a fit of giggles at the thought of himself as a Highland chieftain; as he cared for his houseful of tiresome old people, or sat in bed in the mornings; as he wrote a joking letter to Mrs. Boswell, or prayed to his God.

The high water mark of the 'Life,' and the finest distillation of Boswell as biographer, is the description of the whole episode of the meeting of Johnson and Wilkes at the house of Mr. Dilly, the bookseller: but that is much too long for quotation, and as a short illustration of Boswell's method, take this little description of Johnson and Boswell setting out on an expedition, in the very early days of their friendship, when Johnson was fifty-four and Boswell twenty-one.

On Saturday, July 30, Dr. Johnson and I took a sculler at the Temple-stairs and set out for Greenwich. I asked him if he really thought a knowledge of the Greek and Latin languages an essential requisite to a good education. Johnson. 'Most certainly, Sir; for those who know them have a very great advantage over those who do not. Nay, Sir, it is wonderful what a difference learning makes upon people even in the common intercourse of life, which does not appear to be much connected with it.' 'And yet, (said I) people go through the world very well, and carry on the business

of life to good advantage, without learning.' Johnson. 'Why, Sir, that may be true in cases where learning cannot possibly be of any use; for instance, this boy rows us as well without learning, as if he could sing the song of Orpheus to the Argonauts, who were the first sailors.' He then called to the boy, 'What would you give, my lad, to know about the Argonauts?' 'Sir, (said the boy) I would give what I have.' Johnson was much pleased with his answer, and we gave him a double fare. . . .

We landed at the Old Swan, and walked to Billingsgate, where we took oars and moved smoothly along the silver Thames. It was a very fine day. We were entertained with the immense number and variety of ships that were lying at anchor, and with the beautiful country on each side of the river.

I talked of preaching, and of the great success which those called methodists have. Johnson. 'Sir, it is owing to their expressing themselves in a plain and familiar manner, which is the only way to do good to the common people, and which clergymen of genius and learning ought to do . . . when it is suited to their congregations; a practice for which they will be praised by men of sense. . . .'

And they go on to discuss the architecture of Greenwich hospital, and poetry, and plan out a course of study for Boswell, and compare the delights of the country and the town, and then row back again, with Boswell shivering in the chilly evening air, and Johnson commenting on the 'fantastic foppery' of those who find changes of temperature upsetting!

Boswell's great practical achievement, his preservation of Johnson's talk, is the most obvious feature of his book. This necessitated, as he himself described it, a 'stretch of mind' which is very rare. He used to sit up all night, sometimes four nights a week, writing up his journal, for he found that unless he recorded the

conversations at once, he could not keep the flavor of them fresh.

His arrangement of the talk is extraordinarily skilful. The flow is so easy and natural, the parts played by the other talkers so subtly subdued and harmonized, the varieties of tone so well touched between Johnson talking for victory, or for sociability, or about personal matters. Above all he communicates the solidity and sweep of mind of this man, as topic is piled on topic, knowledge on knowledge, repartee on repartee, judgment on judgment, and gradually all the depth and flexibility of his intellectual scope become apparent, his vast reading, his prodigious memory, his vivid, concrete imagination, his humor, his insight, his wisdom and humanity.

## §

THE Boswell type of biography is by no means suited to every kind of subject. We may say indeed that the chief reason of its excellence as a book is that it is *about* Johnson, and we may say also that the chief excellence of the *Life of Savage* is that it is *by* Johnson. In the one, the subject is far greater than the biographer; and in the other the biographer is far greater than the subject. Boswell perfected the impersonal type of biography: he collected all the available evidence and his aim was, so far as possible, to let his hero speak for himself. Johnson's own method is quite different: only one letter of Savage is quoted and a few of his verses. Johnson, too, collected all the available evidence, but his aim, like that of Lytton Strachey a hundred and fifty years later, was to lay bare the facts of the case as he understood them; that is, to give a definitely personal view of the evidence, to direct the reader's attention towards a certain valuation of the facts.

There is no better illustration of Johnson's own

personality than his life of the charming and disreputable blackguard who was known to the world as Richard Savage. The whole spirit on which he conceived it, reveals at once his great-hearted charity, for Johnson himself had had to face life on exactly the same terms as Savage. He, too, found himself friendless and penniless in London; he, too, had to make his own way by his own wits if he were not to starve, and he had not only to provide for himself but for a wife as well. He knew to the dregs the disillusionment which poverty brings, he knew the bitterness of unappreciated talent, and the indignity of begging for employment. There was no reason apart from sheer strength of character why his life should not have been like that of his friend, and yet there is not the faintest tinge of patronage or self-righteousness in Johnson's sketch. He writes it out of his sympathy with, and pity for, great possibilities wasted, and in a spirit of humane tolerance towards a man whom he insists throughout was more victim than criminal, and caused little suffering to others compared with what he suffered himself.

But in spite of his compassionate heart, Johnson's judgment was much too solid and his honesty far too scrupulous not to see Savage exactly as he was. With unerring precision, softened by the gentlest humor, he analyzes the temperament of the agreeable and dishonest young waster.

He appeared to think himself born to be supported by others. . . . Whoever was acquainted with him was certain to be solicited for small sums, which the frequency of the request made in time considerable. . . . It was observed, that he always asked favours of this kind without the least apparent consciousness of dependence, and that he did not seem to look upon compliance with his request as an obligation that deserved any extraordinary acknowledgments; but a refusal was resented by him



as an affront . . . nor did he readily reconcile himself to those who either denied to lend, or gave him afterwards any intimation that they expected to be repaid.

Incredibly vain, insanely imprudent and improvident, a friend of straw, and a revengeful enemy, his cheerfulness is unquenchable. 'He always preserved a steady confidence in his own capacity.' There was always some excellent reason, unconnected with their own merit, why his poems were not successful:

either they were published at a time when the town was empty, or when the attention of the public was engrossed by some struggle in the parliament . . . or they were by the neglect of the publisher not diligently dispersed, or by his avarice not advertised with sufficient frequency.

In scene after scene, Johnson shows us this familiar and eternal type: spending money the instant it comes into his hands, and borrowing more; always welcomed at first for his charm and brilliance, and always wearing out the generosity and hospitality of his well-wishers; skulking about in rags in mean lodgings pursued by bailiffs; always threatening to write a pamphlet or publish a satire on those who offended him; always believing that the tragedy he was going to write was going to be a huge success, and consumed with vanity about his poetry:

He could not easily leave off, when he had once begun to mention himself or his works; nor ever read his verses without stealing his eyes from the page to discover, in the faces of his audience, how they were affected with any favorite passage.

Yet withal so fascinating a rogue that the very jailer in prison supplied him with his food free, treated him with especial kindness, and finally buried him at his own expense.

We are apt to think that it was Lytton Strachey who invented the art of delicately ironic narrative in biography, but Johnson was before him. His description of Savage being given a small allowance and being sent away by his friends into Wales, to keep him out of debt, is delicious.

He imagined that he should be transported to scenes of flowery felicity, like those which one poet has reflected to another . . . listening, without intermission, to the melody of the nightingale, which he believed was to be heard from every bramble, and which he did not fail to mention as a very important part of the happiness of a country life.

(He) was convinced that the allowance, though scanty, would be more than sufficient for him, being now determined to commence a rigid economy, and to live according to the exactest rules of frugality; for nothing was in his opinion more contemptible than a man who, when he knew his income, exceeded it. . . .

Full of these salutary resolutions, he left London in July 1739, having taken leave with great tenderness of his friends, and parted from the author of this narrative with tears in his eyes. He was furnished with fifteen guineas, and informed that they would be sufficient, not only for the expense of his journey, but for his support in Wales for some time. . . . He promised a strict adherence to his maxims of parsimony, and went away in the stage coach; nor did his friends expect to hear from him till he informed them of his arrival at Swansea.

But, when they least expected, arrived a letter dated the fourteenth day after his departure, in which he sent them word that he was yet upon the road, and without money, and that he therefore could not proceed without a remittance. . . .

The book is full of the most artfully turned little ironic comments. When one reads it, indeed, one is not

surprised to remember that Jane Austen speaks of 'my dear Dr. Johnson': no wonder he was dear to her!

He was remarkably retentive of his ideas, which, when once he was in possession of them, rarely forsook him—a quality which could never be communicated to his money.

It was his peculiar happiness, that he scarcely ever found a stranger whom he did not leave a friend; but it must likewise be added, that he had not often a friend long, without obliging him to become a stranger.

### §

THE method of Lytton Strachey, and of his chief imitators, André Maurois and Harold Nicolson, is more complex than that of Johnson, and far more personal and self-conscious, but it is a development along the same lines. Strachey declares that it has been his purpose to illustrate rather than to explain the characters which he reconstructs with such brilliance, but his own personality is so pervasive and so distinctive that he could never have accomplished such an ideal, which is, indeed, nearer to that of the Boswell type of writing. In spite of his detached manner, Strachey is a moralist at heart. The facts of the case 'as he understands them' means the facts seen from a moral standpoint, which, though it is completely different from the moral standpoints of his predecessors, is every bit as active. His passion for intellectual honesty, his sceptical detachment from all irrational idealism, and his dislike and distrust of all irrationally emotional preoccupations, are impressed upon every page he has written. He holds quite consistently the point of view of the ironic rationalist, and while we are in his company that is the only aspect from which we are allowed to see the facts.

That this limits Strachey's achievement as a biographer can hardly be denied, but while it limits it in width, it intensifies his success within those limits. For in any criticism of personality, there is generally one aspect of the facts, one pose of the sitter, which seems to hold the truest view of the subject. If the biographer can catch this pose, can capture that vision which seems to see most of the facts, and to relate their significance most justly to each other, the result is then an artistic composition which is peculiarly powerful in its effect, because it includes a double rhythm within it, a contrapuntal movement which is peculiarly satisfying. The complete personality which is being presented will be there, vivid, living, unmistakable; and it is exhibited in a searching, clarifying light, whose own quality adds enormously to the quality of the whole. Such portraits are those of Johnson's Savage, and of Strachey's Cardinal Manning and Queen Victoria.

But the method cannot always be so successful. Perhaps no interpretation of one personality by another can ever contain complete psychological truth. Too many incalculable elements enter into the matter. The vision of a Shakespeare can perhaps envisage and interpret every kind of human personality; but there are few such comprehensive and flexible judgments. The majority of mankind can see clearly and in just proportion only a certain field of human nature. Try as they will, anything outside that is seen obliquely, out of perspective: their judgment cannot stretch itself beyond certain limits. Hence there is an obvious astigmatism in the vision of Lytton Strachey towards certain types of character very different from his own. It is impossible not to feel that the focus is slightly wrong in his portraits of Florence Nightingale and of General Gordon, and definitely inadequate in his picture of the Elizabethan scene, just as it is in Johnson's portraits of

Milton or of Swift. The light which his own personality sheds upon the picture is still there, constant in its own quality, but it no longer shines upon a perfectly posed figure, a perfectly composed scene. We feel that the facts might have been understood differently, and understood better. The emphasis is somehow wrong, the manipulation faulty: there is discord between truth of fact and truth of spirit. This incompatibility between fact and spirit must always be a stumbling block to the honest biographer: it is where his emotional tact is most needed. Fact must never be ignored, but spirit must not therefore be disparaged. General Gordon, for example, was a pigheaded man, and his religious opinions were certainly not rational, but he was a hero; and it is really not much nearer the complete truth to let an ironic insistence on his pigheadedness and crazy notions about the Bible distort the picture of his modesty and courage, than to let the picture of his heroism blot out everything else about him. Of the two errors, indeed, we cannot help feeling the first to be the more gross.

Strachey's greatness as a biographer is in the supreme intellectual adroitness with which he handles material. From his power to set a single scene unforgettably before the reader's eyes—a scene such as that of Rome, in the life of Manning, or of the hospital at Scutari—to the whole triumphant composition and compression of his Queen Victoria, his artistry in the management of mass and of felicitous detail is superb. Technically, there is no one who can hold a candle to him, in breadth of design, subtlety of juxtaposition, narrative dexterity, or mere verbal brilliance. With what accomplished art, for instance, he chooses and presents the incidents in Newman's career, which expose with the deadliest precision the character of Manning. We see Newman's simple faith, his transparent honesty of mind, his gentle piety, his directness of speech, his pitiful unhappiness, the

beauty of his selflessness and the completeness of his failure in practical affairs: and over against this, without a word of insistence upon the difference, or of judgment between the two, we see Manning's innate crookedness of mind, his diplomacy and deceit, his animal vigor, his unscrupulous lobbying, his energetic practical ability. Again, how vigorous, how relentless, is the narrative of the end of Sidney Herbert, or the exposition of the events which led up to the death of Gordon, while at every turn we find those forcible images and delicate individual strokes of irony which make the reading of Strachey a sheer intellectual delight. After illustrating from Newman's letters, for instance, his childlike and touching credulity about the miraculous in religious faith, Strachey adds in a separate and isolated paragraph:

When Newman was a child he 'wished that he could believe the Arabian Nights were true.' When he came to be a man, his wish seems to have been granted.

Or take the description of Arnold's sermons in Rugby Chapel.

His congregation sat in fixed attention (with the exception of the younger boys, whose thoughts occasionally wandered), while he propounded the general principles both of his own conduct and that of the Almighty, or indicated the bearing of the incidents of Jewish history in the sixth century B. C. upon the conduct of English schoolboys in 1830.

Or of Manning's call to the ministry.

In spite of devotional exercises and in spite of a voluminous correspondence on religious subjects with his Spiritual Mother, Manning still continued to indulge secular hopes . . . and it was only when the offer of a Merton Fellowship seemed to depend upon his taking

orders that his heavenly ambitions began to assume a definite shape.

### §

IT IS natural that the keen interest of the twentieth century in the study of psychology should have profoundly affected the content of biography, and there is today a stream of 'lives' rewritten in the light of contemporary psychological theory. All factual truth about personality is always of interest, but it is seldom that facts about past lives are sufficiently positive on intimate matters to afford real truth of such theories, and the reader is apt to tire of discussions of the conjectural sexual psychology of the great men and women of history and of the arts.

The biographical work of Lytton Strachey was so immediately and immensely popular, not because it applied any special psychological theory to the problem of human personality, but because it re-introduced the principle of freedom of thought into the writing of biography. It liberated the public mind from the shackles of conventional Victorian platitudes and attitudes: there was a blessed sense of escape in the air of the book. Its readers breathed, with huge relief, the atmosphere of real intellectual honesty and liberty.

Eleven years before the publication of *Eminent Victorians*, however, in 1907, a book had been published which was a greater work of art than Strachey's, and which showed a standard of emotional values and of literary originality in biographical writing which was far in advance of its age. The book was *Father and Son*, first published anonymously, but always known to be the work of Edmund Gosse.

It was not a biography in the ordinary sense of the term. It was an entirely new experiment in literature. In the figures of himself and his father, and the relation-

ship between them in his childhood and adolescence, Gosse saw a symbol of the clash between the dying faith of puritanism and the birth of the new age of reason. But as well as being a record of a struggle between two epochs of thought, it was a record of a struggle between two individual personalities. It immediately suggests comparison with *Grace Abounding*, for *Father and Son* tells of a man who had exactly the same kind of fervid concrete faith as Bunyan; but while Bunyan's book is the revelation of a single soul, and its unity is the isolated story of that soul's struggles with temptation, and final achievement of peace, *Father and Son* tells of the struggle between two souls. Its central theme is the clash of two temperaments. Bunyan's subject is the growing, shifting relationship between a soul and its God; Gosse's is the growing, shifting relationship between two individual human beings. Gosse isolates the drama of that situation, with all its pathos and comedy, its atmosphere of bondage and pressure and misdirected enthusiasm, and presents it, as a most perfectly finished work of art, in the form of an autobiographical narrative.

He himself, the adult narrator, remains completely detached from the drama. We are never conscious of him at all. Our emotions and interest are centered on those vividly actual figures who move and speak and suffer and interact against the backgrounds of small stuffy houses in London or a village on the coast of Devon. But whatever the character of the background, the emotional life portrayed against it is rigidly, cruelly, constricted and curtailed. The little boy grows in body steadily, while his emotional nature is suffocated, stunted and starved. The father moves about at his biological work, scrupulous, upright, industrious, and behind his gentle and dignified exterior burns the inextinguishable fire of the religious fanatic, the unremitting, unrelent-



ing passion of the puritan. The core of his life is that his son must be dedicated to God, that he must be trained up under the most rigid discipline to be worthy of the calling his parents have chosen for him.

The poor little boy, therefore, spends his childish years in having every natural childish impulse towards happiness checked and thwarted. He is allowed no play-mates and no story-books. There is a delightful passage where he describes his first introduction to the world of fiction. In the garret of the house stood an ancient skin-trunk, which became for him the home of romance.

The skin-trunk was absolutely empty, but the inside of the lid of it was lined with sheets of what I now know to have been a sensational novel. It was, of course, a fragment, but I read it, kneeling on the bare floor, with indescribable rapture. It will be recollected that the idea of fiction, of a deliberately invented story, had been kept from me with entire success. I therefore implicitly believed the tale in the lid of the trunk to be a true account of the sorrows of a lady of title, who had to flee the country, and was pursued into foreign lands by enemies bent upon her ruin. . . .

This ridiculous fragment filled me with delicious fears; I fancied that my Mother, who was out so much, might be threatened by dangers of the same sort; and the fact that the narrative came abruptly to an end, in the middle of one of its most thrilling sentences, wound me up almost to a disorder of wonder and romance.

It was because his childhood was one long unnatural nervous strain that he remembered it in such a phenomenally vivid way. At the rare periods when he was with other children and away from his parents, no more remains than remains in the memory of the normal healthy child, but the succession of scenes of strained emotion in which he was forced to take part photographed themselves indelibly upon his mind. We see

him alone with his mother dying of cancer; learning the terrible doctrines of damnation from his father's lips; living through the appalling Sunday programs, with hardly any intermission between various forms of religious exercises from eight o'clock in the morning until long after his week-day bedtime, so that he would 'creep home' from the final prayer-meeting 'so tired that the weariness was like physical pain'; or being baptized with the full ritual of adult baptism when his father had arranged that he had been 'converted' at the age of fourteen! or on that fateful day when he had received an invitation to 'tea and games,' and his father declared that they must decide the question of its righteousness by 'laying the matter before the Lord.'

We did so, kneeling side by side, with our backs to the window and our foreheads pressed upon the horsehair cover of the small, coffin-like sofa. My Father prayed aloud, with great fervour, that it might be revealed to me, by the voice of God, whether it was or was not the Lord's will that I should attend the Browns' party. My Father's attitude seemed to me to be hardly fair, since he did not scruple to remind the Deity of various objections to a life of pleasure and of the snakes that lie hidden in the grass of evening parties. It would have been more scrupulous, I thought, to give no sort of hint of the kind of answer he desired and expected.

It will be justly said that my life was made up of very trifling things, since I have to confess that this incident of the Browns' invitation was one of its landmarks. As I knelt, feeling very small, by the immense bulk of my Father, there gushed through my veins like a wine the determination to rebel. Never before, in all these years of my vocation, had I felt my resistance take precisely this definite form. We rose presently from the sofa, my forehead and the backs of my hands still chafed by the texture of the horsehair, and we faced one another in the dreary light. My Father, perfectly confident in the

success of what had really been a sort of incantation, asked me in a loud wheedling voice, 'Well, and what is the answer which our Lord vouchsafes?' I said nothing, and so my Father, more sharply, continued, 'We have asked Him to direct you to a true knowledge of His will. We have desired Him to let you know whether it is, or is not, in accordance with His wishes that you should accept this invitation from the Browns.' He positively beamed down at me; he had no doubt of the reply. He was already, I believe, planning some little treat to make up to me for the material deprivation. But my answer came, in the high-piping accents of despair: 'The Lord says I may go to the Browns.' My Father gazed at me in speechless horror. He was caught in his own trap, and though he was certain that the Lord had said nothing of the kind, there was no road open for him but just sheer retreat.

This is the spirit of the whole narrative. It is never bitter, never angry, never pretentious. The two figures are seen without heat, and without any distortion of violent emotion or theatrical pose, in the gentle, even light of an intermingled irony and humor and pity. In that, they play out their moving tragi-comedy to its poignant and inevitable conclusion, and we leave them 'in opposite hemispheres of the soul' with 'the thick o' the world' between them.

Autobiography is now almost as popular as biography, and with the immense growth of interest in individual psychology and in the truthful reporting of individual experience, we should find it a form which offers much fresh promise and enlarged scope for the literary artist. But there has not yet appeared another *Father and Son*.



## THE NOVEL

THE novelist is he who, having seen life, and being so excited by it that he absolutely must transmit his vision to others, chooses narrative fiction as the liveliest vehicle for the relief of his feelings.

So Arnold Bennett described his own calling, and it is a very good description. A good novel always has that sense of liveliness and excitement about it, and it is the literary form which brings us closer than any other to the flavor of life as we taste it in our own experience. The drama is a more direct representation of life, it is true, since it actually embodies it in flesh and blood creatures before our eyes, but the *scope* of the novel is far wider, since it includes the revelation of the mind, and all the unexpressed and even unconscious aspects of experience, in a detailed way quite impossible in a play.

The illusion of watching life itself in a novel is so complete that it always makes the adequate criticism of fiction as literature difficult. Indeed, dealing as it does with the actions and passions of human beings whom we think of directly as fellow human creatures, and telling of crisis and incident, character and circumstance within the observation of us all, it is *bound* to be very largely concerned with the emotional and moral values men live by, and to provoke discussion about such values, so that to criticize the novel without becoming involved in questions of conduct is an impossible task for even the most determined of aesthetes.

The natural and primitive way to read a novel is to read it for its story and its characters; to become ab-

sorbed in it as we would in the observation of a piece of 'real life,' and to ask no further questions about it. And after all, that is what the novelist wants us to do. As Sterne says, 'I would go fifty miles on foot to kiss the hand of that man whose generous heart will give up the reins of his imagination into the author's hands—be pleased he knows not why, and cares not wherefore.' The novelist is creating an illusion of life for his readers, and he wants us to accept it, to become submerged in it, to see it and hear it and feel it as he himself has seen and heard and felt it, to believe in it whole-heartedly, to want it to go on forever! And that, I am sure, is the way to get the most enjoyment from reading a novel. But what is important, and what is the whole purpose of training in this field, and of not reading novels entirely in this delightful primitive way, is that we should believe whole-heartedly in the happenings and characters of good novels and not bad ones; that we should be absorbed and delighted in the company of a rich humanity and a vigorous or unusual mind, and not in that of false values and feeble sentiment.

For in a novel, as in every other form of literature, we are always in the company of the author. We have the illusion that we are reading a direct reflection of experience, but we are, in fact, reading the reflection of the mind and spirit of one individual. That one individual has made a rigid selection from life, excluding everything irrelevant or superfluous to his purpose, and he has seen and synthesized that selection with the vision which is peculiar to himself. If he is an artist, we believe whole-heartedly in his vision as we read. *This* is life, we say, as we read *Pride and Prejudice*. This delicate, clear-edged picture of a tiny corner of English society in the early nineteenth century contains a complete view of common human nature: it is all there. And then perhaps we read *Vanity Fair*, and we say, O no, Jane

Austen to be sure was wonderful in that tiny sphere; she kept everything so marvellously to scale that we were quite unaware of her limitations, but her vision was only that of a humorous, sheltered spinster after all—it is *this* which is life. It is this wide panoramic view of the world, this variety of character and circumstance, this knowledge of all types of human beings, this succession of vivid scenes in which they play their parts. Life brings us all to that inevitable conclusion: ‘Ah! *Vanitas Vanitatum!* which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied?’ And then, we read *The Old Wives’ Tale*, and we say, but *this* is life! Life is really the sense of the passage of time; its very essence is in that moment when Sophia looks at the body of her dead husband:

Sophia then experienced a pure and primitive emotion, uncoloured by any moral or religious quality. She was not sorry that Gerald had wasted his life. . . . The manner of his life was of no importance. What affected her was that he had once been young, and that he had grown old, and was now dead. That was all. Youth and vigour had come to that. Youth and vigour always came to that. Everything came to that. . . . By the corner of her eye, reflected in the mirror of a wardrobe near the bed, she glimpsed a tall, forlorn woman, who had once been young and now was old; who had once exulted in abundant strength, and trodden proudly on the neck of circumstance, and now was old. He and she had once loved and burned and quarrelled in the glittering and scornful pride of youth. But time had worn them out. ‘Yet a little while,’ she thought, ‘and I shall be lying on a bed like that! And what shall I have lived for? What is the meaning of it?’

That is life, we say; and life is the way the human consciousness is wrought upon ceaselessly from childhood to old age, by its parents and its friends and its

teachers, by its work and its play, and by all the religious and political and social traditions which enmesh it. Life is the ceaseless application of the twin truths that environment makes character and that character triumphs over environment. . . . And then we read *To the Lighthouse*, and in a flash of revelation we think, Why, none of the old novelists found the secret! The vision of the outward scene alone is not life at all. Life is the snaring of the passing moment; experience and character are made up of the silt of innumerable unremembered fleeting instants of consciousness. Life does not build itself into the convenient symmetry of a plot, it is just a succession of detached moments, of uncontrolled impulses of the sub-conscious mind; of dissociated images, of fugitive, flickering mood. It is discontinuous, inconclusive, inconsequential. . . . This, at last, is life!

## §

LIFE itself goes on, and soon we realize that what we have been discussing are books and the writers who create them: what we have been enjoying are the pleasures of illusion, not the pleasures of experience. The life of a novel is the vitality of its author: it is the life in its creator, not in the raw material of his creation: it is the vitality of the expression, not the vitality of the thing expressed. Life remains life. It may be interesting to the liver of it, or it may be dull—most people have but little control over that—but books are exactly what their authors make them. We imagine that there are interesting stories and dull stories, but it is not so: there are no dull stories, there are only dull people who write books; and, we must add, dull people who read them.

Inevitably, then, we are back again at the realization that the value of a novel rests ultimately on the quality of the personality who wrote it, and on the skill with

which that personality can use language to communicate the quality of his vision and knowledge. There are as many ways of looking at life as there are novelists who look at it, but if we take a wide view of the whole course of the novel, we can easily distinguish certain types of personality among writers of fiction which recur over and over again.

There is first of all that type of large, comprehensive vision which seems to see all and to know all, and of which the greatest example is Tolstoi. His wide human understanding seems to embrace the whole of life, and to see it in a perfect and just proportion. In England, Fielding, Scott, Thackeray, George Eliot, and, at his best, Arnold Bennett, have the same *quality* of mind and heart, without the same sweep and profundity of scope. They seem to see human life with the eyes of a normal, sympathetic, intelligent human being: their human strength is their inspired normality.

Then there are all those novelists whose genius is so personal and peculiar to themselves that they seem to create a world of their own in their books, a world which exists as a separate entity from that of familiar existence. The enjoyment of Dickens, for instance, depends on the acceptance of a world which contains Mr. Micawber and Miss Mowcher, Quilp and Mr. Pumblechook, Uriah Heep and Dick Swiveller. Standards of true and false become non-existent in it, for it has only to be consistent with itself: provided the spell is upon us, and we have accepted this world, we are prepared to accept anything which happens in it. Or again, take the world of a Charlotte Brontë novel; that elf-world of queer children and eerie dreams, of goblin-like Mrs. Reeds and Mr. Brocklehursts and Madame Becks and of the harlequinade comedy of 'high society' in *Jane Eyre*. That world dominated at every moment by the passion, bitted and bridled, but always surging, always



blazing, always raging beneath the surface of a plain, undersized, drab little governess, who cries eternally, as Jane Eyre cried to Rochester as she leaves him, 'We are born to strive and endure: do so.' Or, in the contemporary novel, there is the world of D. H. Lawrence: a world where every tree and flower, every insect, mountain and animal, lives with a startling, glowing intensity of individual vitality which we meet nowhere else, but where human beings lose shape and outline, where a whole emotional relationship lies behind the statement 'they were aware of each other'; where intercourse between human beings is less by language, touch or gesture than by electric currents and vibrations, by dark floods of passion released from one and drawn into another, by living streams of unseen energy or irritating occult messages of disruption and unrest.

'Personally,' said H. G. Wells, 'personally I have no use at all for life as it is, except as raw material. It bores me to look at things unless there is also the idea of doing something with them. . . . It is always about life being altered that I write, or about people developing schemes for altering life. And I have never once "presented" life. My apparently most objective books are criticisms and incitements to change.' Here is the confession of faith of yet another type of novelist: the satirist, the social reformer. And he contrasts himself with his antipodes in the writing of fiction, the man who 'presents' life, the pure self-conscious artist. In some of Wells's books—in *Kipps* and *Mr. Polly* and *Tono-Bungay*, we can be completely absorbed in the story for its own sake, but we are never unaware of the presence of the author's intellectual ideas, and of his courageous, gusty, challenging personality.

'To you,' says Wells to Henry James, 'literature is an end, like painting: to me it is a means, like architecture; it has a use.' And in a cruel and comic passage, he de-

scribes what the art of Henry James appeared like to him:

It is like a church lit, but with no congregation to distract you, with every light and line focussed on the high altar. And on the altar, very reverently placed, intensely there, is a dead kitten, an egg-shell, a piece of string.

There must, of course, be much of the artist in every novelist, for fiction is an art, but there are certain writers—Sterne, Henry James, Conrad, Joyce, and Virginia Woolf are the chief among writers in England, and Dos Passos and Hemingway in America—whom we think of as absorbingly, passionately interested in their workmanship. This does not mean that their 'content' is not absorbing to the reader—indeed it is just because their vision is unique that they have had to find a personal technique to transmit it, but we cannot separate the content and its expression. We read the books with the very clear consciousness that this is art, not life; there is an alertness of intellectual faculty needed to appreciate *Tristram Shandy*, *Lord Jim*, *Mrs. Dalloway* or *1919* which need not be there when we enjoy the purely human delights of *Anna Karenina*, *David Copperfield* and *Mr. Polly*.

## §

WE HAVE said that the value of a novel rests ultimately upon the value of the personality which creates it, but that personality lives in a certain period of time, which inevitably has an effect upon it. The 'spirit of the age' is a shadow which walks inexorably by the side of the novelist and which he cannot escape. Of course any novel which is a work of art will have a quality in it which will make it immortal; there will always be the general in it as well as the particular, the eternal as well

as the temporal. Thus the satire on vulgarity and snobbery and greed in Jane Austen or in Thackeray is quite independent of the facts that Miss Crawley drove about in a barouche or that Mr. Collins lived before anyone had thought of an inferiority complex: the passion of Jane Eyre is not just the emotion of a mid-Victorian governess, or the life of Constance Baines just the life of a late-Victorian middle-class provincial. But at the same time, just because the novel is so much involved with social relationships and problems of conduct, the standards and outlook of its own day are almost always impressed upon it, and these sometimes have a very profound effect upon its acceptability at a later date. The reader is always apt to under-rate the literary merit of a novel when he feels out of sympathy with its standards of human value, just as he is apt to over-rate the literary merit of contemporary fiction because he is in sympathy with its standards. Mr. Middleton Murry, in an essay on Proust in *Discoveries*, has an interesting argument on this topic. He says that the writers of any new period always *seem* to know more and to feel more than the writers they supersede. If the idea of Natural Selection has been freshly introduced into the consciousness, one is peculiarly sensitive to the idea of the aimlessness in all experience: if the idea of Freudian psychology is freshly embodied in the consciousness, one is at once sensitively aware of the ubiquitous manifestations of sex. All this has a very profound effect upon society in general, but we are apt to forget that 'an extension of the sensibility has in itself no literary value; and, even when the creative alchemy of art has intervened, the expression of a new emotion will be far less significant than the expression of a comprehensive attitude to life, into which the new perceptions have been absorbed.'

In our own day, therefore, we mistake the value of

many novels because we judge their merit on what is new in their *ideas*. The work of Aldous Huxley is a case in point. He is an extraordinarily intelligent man. He has, I should imagine, the most comprehensive intelligence of his day: his intellectual equipment and his artistic sensibility are both of the first order. There is no one whose mind is better fitted to combat all the contemporary false sentiment and feeble thinking which he satirizes so brilliantly. He is the best of moral and intellectual tonics. But he grasps and interprets life through the ideas of the moment, rather than animating it through a wider and more permanent kind of experience—the interaction of human character and event—and one suspects that his reputation will be mainly a contemporary one, and that only among the intelligentsia. He holds the position in our age which Peacock held a hundred years ago, and the readers of Peacock today are very few. Conversely, we find our appreciation of the novels of the past handicapped by what we feel now to be out of date, or false, in their ideas. And as the standards by which we judge novels will always be primarily human and secondly literary, it is difficult to avoid this dilemma. It is only primitive humor and primitive passion which are quite independent of social codes. Uncle Toby and Parson Adams, Mr. Micawber and Kipps, Mrs. Bennett and Mrs. Poyser all inhabit a dateless world which never changes: nor can *Wuthering Heights* be touched by the fashions of any age. Though it appears to be clearly defined in time and space, its central vitality is the communication of a kind of elemental passion which is bodiless.

But in general the novel 'dates' more than any other kind of literature, and it seems inevitable that it should. Great creative artists such as Defoe, for instance, or Richardson or Fielding, if they were writing today, with the same qualities of heart and mind and observa-

tion, would certainly have an immense vogue. But the mere facts of the alteration in manners, and of the whole scale of morality and range of knowledge they embody, make such a barrier for the average novel reader that they remain the reading of students only.

We find much the same difficulty nowadays with the Victorian novel. It was a most unlucky accident for the history of English fiction, that the age which possessed men and women novelists in England with the most sane and comprehensive minds, should have held a social code which prevented the free functioning, or at least the free expression, of that mind. We have no artists in fiction of the stature of Tolstoi or Dostoievsky, but Thackeray and George Eliot might well have equalled Balzac and Stendhal if they had lived in an equally hospitable environment, and Dickens might have been a great comprehensive artist instead of only a great humorist.

It is the Victorian attitude to women which is the great stumbling block. It is impossible as we read Thackeray not to be convinced that he had the greatest contempt for the opinion of his day as to what made a 'good woman.' Mrs. Pendennis is a good woman, and Thackeray shows her practising the most unscrupulous behavior in the episode between her son and Fanny Bolton. Fanny is a young working-class girl who falls in love with Arthur Pendennis. Their relations are perfectly innocent, and when Arthur falls ill, Fanny nurses him devotedly until his mother arrives. Mrs. Pendennis, however, immediately suspects her of having an irregular relationship with her son, and turns her out of his rooms without a word of thanks for her help. She refuses to ask Arthur to tell her the truth of the matter, from so-called delicacy, and instead of not meddling at all in his affairs, she opens, reads and suppresses a letter from Fanny to him. Getting no answer to this causes

Fanny extreme misery. The whole attitude of Mrs. Pendennis—an attitude not by any means confined to Victorian mothers—gave an opportunity for a magnificent satiric effect, but Thackeray is afraid of his public, and prefers to praise Mrs. Pendennis fulsomely for her maternal devotion, instead of satirizing her unmercifully for the form it takes. There is the same thing in *Vanity Fair*, in the situation between Amelia and Dobbin. We feel Thackeray himself to have envisaged very clearly the truth of the position—indeed it is proved that he does so by Dobbin's final outburst, where he declares her to be a mere self-deceiver in her idiotic fidelity to the memory of her worthless young husband, and to be quite unworthy of the love he has devoted to her. But this declaration comes too late, and is hopelessly weakened by Thackeray having kept us in the dark throughout the book as to his real opinion, and having time upon time insisted that Amelia is the perfect type of sweet selfless womanhood. This is what his age wanted to think, and that is what he feels he must give them.

It is the same with Dickens. In spite of the first-rate comedy in *David Copperfield*, the vivid dramatic scenes, the vigorous narrative skill, it is marred for the modern reader by the really nauseating sentiment of the Little Em'ly episode. The situation is a powerful one. The seduction of a young girl by a man who has every intention of leaving her as soon as he is tired of her is eternally moving, and the emotion is further intensified by the devotion of old Peggotty to her, and by her disloyalty to Ham Peggotty, whom she was to marry, and his consequent suffering. But there is no sanity or proportion in Dickens's attitude towards the tragedy of the situation. The senseless wanderings of Peggotty all over Europe, the scenes with Rosa Dartle, the insistence that Emily's future life is irrevocably blighted, all strike a

note of complete falsity to the modern ear, and the very real pathos of the episode is lost in the distortion of the standards which are applied to it.

With the passing of the Victorian age new fashions in ideas appear in society and therefore in the novel, and the contemporary consciousness begins to feel more at home in it. The change can be seen very well if we compare *Pendennis* with Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*, or *David Copperfield* with *Of Human Bondage* by Somerset Maugham. This last is a fine book, but Maugham has nothing like the sheer creative zest of Dickens, and where they are each narrating of childhood, and no social or moral standards are involved, it is obvious at once that Dickens is by far the greater writer. Young Philip Carey, his uncle and aunt, and his schooldays, are clear enough, but they have none of that 'bite' which makes the pictures of David at home, of the Peggotty family at Yarmouth, of Mr. Creakle's school, of the Micawber household and of David's tramp to Dover, etch themselves unforgettably into the memory. But once Philip is adult, his story takes on all the reality and conviction which gradually slips further and further away from that of David. As he grows up and reason develops in him, he sees the falseness and stupidity of the religious and social ideals which the older generation imposed upon him, and he realizes that there are three things which he has got to find out for himself: 'man's relation to the world he lives in, man's relation with the men among whom he lives, and finally, man's relation to himself.'

Philip falls in love, just as David does, with a woman in no way worthy of him, as trivial and empty-headed as Dora herself; and nowhere is the difference between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries seen so clearly as in the way in which the two writers treat such an episode. In Dickens the affair is made into a charming

romantic interlude. Dora is all delicate, feminine frivolity, and David all rapturous youthful passion. The inevitable misfit of the marriage is treated with Dickens's inimitable light humor, and the inevitable tragedy of its future is eluded by Dora's conveniently early death. Maugham will have no easy romance. Mildred is anaemic and suburban, cold and common. 'It's not much fun being in love with a girl who has no imagination and no sense of humour' thinks Philip miserably, as he tries to make himself more acceptable to her by reading *The Sporting Times*! His passion is not a romantic rapture, it is a sick, heavy obsession, and their life together is exactly what the life of two such mismated creatures would inevitably be.

Philip sets out to find what is the meaning of life, and he comes to the inevitable conclusion of the rationalist that life has no meaning; that the value of life is the living of life; that man is born, suffers, enjoys, and dies, and that the only design in existence is the pattern he makes, or thinks he can detect, in his own individuality.

It is this idea which has proved the dominant interest in the work of those novelists who have explored fresh territory in their art during the twentieth century, and it has caused a gradual shifting of their vision from an observation of the function of life to an exploration of the nature of life. We see the change first of all in Conrad, and in his novels he finds a new approach to the nature of experience. The general effect of a novel, he declared, must be the general effect which life makes on the liver of it. Life does not narrate, it makes impressions on our brains: and that is how he strove to depict it in his fiction.

My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make



you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see*. That—and no more, and it is everything. . . . To snatch in a moment of courage, from the remorseless rush of time, a passing phase of life, is only the beginning of the task. The task approached in tenderness and faith is to hold up unquestioningly, without choice and without fear, the rescued fragment before all eyes in the light of a sincere mood. It is to show its vibration, its colour, its form; and through its movement, its form and its colour, reveal the substance of its truth—disclose its inspiring secret: the stress and passion within the core of each convincing moment.

Huxley, again, in *Point Counterpoint*, makes Philip Quarles outline the plan of a new novel he wants to write, which shall reveal the extreme queerness of the new vision of life. The essence of it, he says, is multiplicity.

Multiplicity of eyes and multiplicity of aspects seen. For instance, one person interprets events in terms of bishops; another in terms of flannel camisoles; another, like that young lady from Gulmberg, thinks of it in terms of good times. And then there's the biologist, the chemist, the physicist, the historian. Each sees, professionally, a different aspect of the event, a different layer of reality. What I want to do is to look with all those eyes at once.

It is the complexity of the nature of life which has filled the modern imagination, and the old study of character, which was the main basis of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel, has now become the study of the *consciousness*, a much larger and vaguer unit. The individual consciousness is seen to be the focus of all experience, and the individual consciousness is an infinitely complicated thing, neither homogeneous nor coherent nor logical. As a result, the novelists who possess this fresh vision of a re-arranged scale of values, are

impatient of the neat human patterns into which their predecessors wove these formless masses of diverse impulses and memories. They feel as Philip Quarles felt, or as Lily Briscoe felt in *To the Lighthouse*, as she watched Mrs. Ramsay.

One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with, she reflected. Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with, she thought. Among them must be one that was stone blind to her beauty. One wanted most some secret sense, fine as air, with which to steal through keyholes and surround her where she sat knitting, talking, sitting silent in the window alone; which took to itself and treasured up like the air which held the smoke of the steamer, her thoughts, her imaginations, her desires. What did the hedge mean to her, what did the garden mean to her, what did it mean to her when a wave broke? . . . And then what stirred and trembled in her mind when the children cried, 'How's that? How's that?' cricketing?

## §

THERE remains the very large question of *how* is it all done? The art of fiction is the way in which the novelist conveys his vision of life to the reader. He is not talking *about* life like the essayist, or presenting one particular life, like the biographer. He is *revealing* life, and his problem is how to make the reader hear and feel and see as he has done himself.

With most great novelists of the past, we never feel as we read that it was any problem to them at all. This is partly because they possessed more or less instinctively the inborn art of telling a story, and it is partly because, as a matter of fact, most great novelists of the past employed a very loose technique and were wasteful of their effects. This is the reason for the extreme tediousness of

much of them, but provided that the material interests us, it is not of the slightest consequence. What does it matter if Tolstoi or Balzac or Proust write far more than is strictly necessary for technical perfection; what does it matter if they spread and sprawl, when we never want the books to come to an end? It does not, of course, matter at all, and a great creative artist can do almost anything.

But however lax a writer's technique may be, there is always a host of practical questions which face every novelist. Where is the narrator of the story to stand? Is he to be in the story, identified with one of the characters, as he is in *Wuthering Heights*; or is he to be completely impersonal and never appear, as in *Madame Bovary*; or is he to be a chorus or showman who can comment on and direct the course of things, as in *Vanity Fair*? Or again, where is the reader to be? Is he to be facing towards the teller of the story, listening to him, or is he to be standing watching the action itself? Is the story to be shown from one point of view only, and if so, is it to be from a point outside itself or through the eyes of one of the actors in it; or is the vision of it to shift from point to point? And what is its *scale*? Is the aim to give a panoramic view, as Tolstoi does, or Balzac or Thackeray or Dos Passos; or is it to dramatize the unseen factors which motivate a situation, as Henry James does; is it to illustrate a theme, as Wells does, or is it to embody a definite point of view, to be limited by a definite mood, as Jane Austen is by her choice of the mood of social comedy? Above all, the novelist has to decide how his action is going to be set in motion, and how it is going to develop thence to its conclusion.

It is commonly supposed that it is the creation of character which gives the essential vitality to fiction, because in general we are more aware of the characters

than of the events which have called them into being: and besides, once a character is completely created, it exists for us outside the book it first lived in, and we use it as a reference and standard in life as well as in literature. But character cannot emerge except from a course of events. We know Becky Sharpe because we have seen her driving away from Miss Pinkerton's, and vamping Jos Sedley, and worming herself into the confidence of the Crawleys. Personality must be defined in space and time before it can become actual (which is why *The Waves*, though it is a marvellous prose poem, does not satisfy as a novel), and the central point, therefore, at which to approach the technique of a piece of fiction is always the question of how the events are made to move.

Until the present day, there were only two main methods, which every novelist mixed in varying degrees in his work. These two methods were the dramatic and the descriptive ways of telling a story. In the first the reader's eyes are directed straight at the characters upon the stage, while in the other the reader looks at the author and sees the characters through the author's account of them. There are certain novels which are presented almost entirely in one or the other method. *Anna Karenina*, for instance, is almost all acted out as on a huge stage, in a marvellous succession of scenes, and it is this sense of being always in the immediate present of the action which gives the book that atmosphere of direct living, that sense of almost tangible relationship with warm, breathing personalities, which no other book in the world possesses. An illustration of a novel on a completely different scale, which is presented in the same way, is *The Awkward Age* by Henry James, but the complete alteration in proportion, and particularly that kind of clinical chill, that sterilized emotional atmosphere which clings to Henry James's novels, makes

the whole effect absolutely unlike. (*The Awkward Age* should be compared with *The Ambassadors*, which is entirely descriptive in method. There is a most interesting and revealing account of both books in *The Craft of Fiction* by Percy Lubbock.)

Balzac is the greatest descriptive artist among novelists. Before ever the action begins to move at all, enormous blocks of discursive matter are placed as a foundation and as an environment for it. History, towns, streets, houses, rooms, slums, and above all, complicated financial operations, are described at immense length and with immense gusto. There is no one who can pack so much into description as Balzac, or who can create such absorbing interest in it. His narrative is so solid, so convincing, so massive, so concrete, that there is no chink through which the illusion of reality can escape.

The only English author who is at all comparable to Balzac is Thackeray, but the drop is a long one. Not that Thackeray has not a very masterly command of descriptive method, for there is no one who can do it better. Read, for instance, the opening chapters of *Pendennis*, or the description of Becky's career in London, living on nothing a year. It has not Balzac's density of effect, but it is perfectly poised, with such a broad easy sweep about it. But the trouble with Thackeray is that he cannot or will not leave his story alone. 'As we bring our characters forward, I will ask leave, as a man and a brother, not only to introduce them, but occasionally to step down from the platform and talk about them.' And, alas, the reader is not in a position to refuse leave. So that at every turn the story is interrupted. We long to be allowed to become absorbed and submerged in it, to sink into an illusion of its reality and to be carried along by its easy flow. But no, we are perpetually jerked out of it, and set on the bank while the author makes us

listen to a long monologue about youth or love or women or hypocrisy or the past; or worst of all, while he tells us that it is all really only a story, and that he might have made it happen in a variety of other ways. It is quite maddening!

No, for a single example of a fine novel told in what we now think of as the traditional method, I would choose a book written more than half a century later than *Vanity Fair*, *The Old Wives' Tale* by Arnold Bennett. Although its technique appears to us now a very straightforward one, it is really much more self-conscious than the art of the great Victorians. Arnold Bennett was a close student of Flaubert and of Guy de Maupassant, and the impersonality of the author was the central doctrine of his creed. He tried to tell his story without any conscious intrusion of himself as interpreter: the telling of it was a problem in the selection, arrangement and perspective of the matter he had to present. Guy de Maupassant had described what the artist in fiction had to do.

Life leaves everything on the same scale; it crowds facts together or drags them out indefinitely. Art, on the contrary, consists in using precautions and making preparations, in contriving artful and imperceptible transitions, in bringing the essential events into full light, by simple ingenuity of composition, and giving to all others the degree of relief suited to their importance, so as to produce a profound sense of the special truth one wishes to exhibit.

He might almost be describing *The Old Wives' Tale*.

It is a novel with a theme. In a preface to a later edition (it was originally published in 1908), Bennett describes how the inspiration for the novel came to him. He saw a fat, ugly, grotesque-looking woman come into a restaurant and sit down. She was so fussy and so awk-

ward that everyone laughed at her, and it came into Bennett's mind that a novelist ought to be able to make a heartrending book out of the history of such a woman as she, for

there is an extreme pathos in the mere fact that every stout, ageing woman was once a young girl with the unique charm of youth in her form and movements and in her mind. And the fact that the change from the young girl to the stout ageing woman is made up of an infinite number of infinitesimal changes, each unperceived by her, only intensifies the pathos.

The novel finally had two heroines instead of one, but the hero, like the hero of Tolstoi's *War and Peace*, is simply Time. Its motto is from Shakespeare's sonnets:

Time doth transfix the beauty set on Youth  
And delves the parallels in Beauty's brow.

Bennett's great achievement is the power with which he has conveyed the slow inexorable passing of two lifetimes, the imperceptible flight of time, the gradual, unmarked processes of change, measured only in the silt of memories and the weight of the layer upon layer of experience spread upon the mind and the heart.

The action is presented with a blending of the dramatic and the descriptive. There is a series of the most artfully selected and contrasted scenes in which we see and hear the characters acting out their destinies directly, and there are brilliant discursive interludes, creating the atmosphere of the environment, or telescoping the action into a retrospective generalization. We see the two girls, like two racehorses in their splendid young vitality; and then Constance as the young married woman, getting plump and matronly; as the middle-aged widow, stout, stupid, sweet-natured; as the injudicious mother, with her selfless passion for her

selfish young son, Cyril. Finally, we see her lying on her deathbed, summing up what her life had been:

She had lived in honesty and kindliness for a fair number of years, and she had tasted triumphant hours. . . . When she surveyed her life, and life in general, she would think, with a sort of tart but not sour cheerfulness: '*Well, that is what life is!*'

And we see Sophia, in all the glory of her infatuation for the second-rate Gerald Scales, in all the dignity and distress of her awakening; getting older and more faded in beauty in her incessant and lonely struggle to run her *pension* successfully; her whole passion centered in saving money, and in being a landlady—'*the* landlady: efficient, stylish, diplomatic—tremendously experienced.' And finally we see her, in the passage I have already quoted, alone with the body of her dead husband, whom she has not seen for thirty years.

Human identity and human unimportance—the two blend inextricably throughout the book. Life inevitably tricks the individual, filling him with ever-blossoming hopes, smiting him in the end with the common lot of apparent futility, but life is worth living, simply because every human being instinctively and tenaciously holds it to be so. That is the impression the whole novel leaves. Arnold Bennett communicates a double vision to the reader. On the one hand, we see the lives of his characters in the light of a sophisticated, cultivated experience. From this position we see, with the most sharp-edged actuality, the setting of the whole action. We see every detail of the solid discomfort of the house in St. Luke's Square; of the life of the servant in the damp basement kitchen; what they all had for their six o'clock tea, and Constance's bonnet trimmed with jet fruit and crape leaves. We see all the ugly, narrow, dingy provincial life of the English lower middle-class,



against the grey, dank, smoky chill of the English midlands, and all the perfect bourgeois gentility of Sophia's final home in Paris, the *Pension Frensbam*. Arnold Bennett has an almost Balzacian love of detail: nothing is unimportant to him, even if it is only the little plop which a gas jet gives when it is lighted, or the gentle sound of wool being drawn through canvas.

The scale of the physical and mental environments in which both the sisters live their lives shows us inexorably how dull and inadequate and limited and impoverished those lives are by the standard of the sophisticated intelligence. But Arnold Bennett does not leave us with that vision only. Throughout the book the perspective constantly shifts, and no sooner do we feel how dreadful life must be in these circumstances, than we are made to see that it is in fact not in the least dreadful, because the characters take them all as a matter of course. We are made to see life through their eyes, and to realize the great truth that emotional standards are quite untouched by social and physical environment. Their lives become not only visible, but perfectly intelligible. We both see and understand the whole personality of little Samuel Povey, the draper who marries Constance. We live through his cowardices and his triumphs, we sympathize with his gusts of independence, his love for Constance, his pigheaded loyalty to his cousin; and how 'at the end, destiny took hold of him and displayed, to the observant, the vein of greatness which runs through every soul without exception. He embraced a cause, lost it, and died of it.' We see Sophia falling in love with Gerald Scales: and realize that her feeling is much the same as that of Juliet.

'So you decided to come out as usual!' 'And may I ask what book you have chosen?' These were the phrases she heard, and to which she responded with similar

phrases. And meanwhile a miracle of ecstasy had opened—opened like a flower. She was walking along Wedgwood Street by his side, slowly, on the scraped pavements, where marble bulbs of snow had defied the spade and remained. She and he were exactly of the same height, and she kept looking into his face and he into hers. This was all the miracle. Except that she was not walking on the pavement—she was walking on the intangible sward of paradise! Except that the houses had receded and faded, and the passers-by were subtilized into unnoticeable ghosts! . . .

What had happened? Nothing! The most commonplace occurrence! The eternal cause had picked up a commercial traveller (it might have been a clerk or a curate, but it in fact was a commercial traveller), and endowed him with all the glorious, unique, incredible attributes of a god, and planted him down before Sophia in order to produce the eternal effect.

## §

ONE of the most fascinating mysteries in the technique of a great artist in fiction is the way in which the characters seem to shift in size and significance during the course of a book. It is, I think, one of the sure tests of genius that the actors in a story should be capable of this kind of expansion into beings of universal meaning. Perhaps because it is an attribute of genius, it is rare in the English novel, for there are not many writers of genius among our novelists, and their characters are apt to remain obstinately rooted in a particular time and place. The characters of *Anna Karenina* are Russians of the late nineteenth century, but Anna and Levin are eternal human nature, in its greatness and its smallness. The characters of *Barchester Towers* by contrast, though they live with great vividness in their surroundings, are English provincial gentry of the late nineteenth century, and have no touch of anything else in

their being. Even George Eliot, with all her gifts of sympathetic insight and her breadth of vision (*Middlemarch* is, I think, among the first half-dozen novels of its age), does not wing her way into the eternal aspects of things: nor does Thackeray nor Dickens nor even Arnold Bennett. It is not a gift which has anything to do with the power of generalizing about life, or even with presenting it with great richness and diversity. But when it is there it is unmistakable. It is what makes Jane Eyre, in the scene where she tells Rochester she is going to leave him, suddenly become a figure of universal significance, although that scene is full of turgid writing and melodramatic nonsense. There is a similar feeling often in Hardy, again in spite of a most clumsy style, and often in Conrad, but the only English novelist who possesses it unfalteringly is Emily Brontë.

*Wuthering Heights* transports the reader to a plane of existence peculiar to itself. Emily Brontë's values are elemental rather than moral. *Wuthering Heights* is a book entirely about passion, and it is a book entirely without sex. The marriages and miseries of the characters have nothing to do with conventional moral standards, they prove only that the whirlwind cannot mate with the quiet places, or the wolf with the doe. If this happens, the eternal laws of Nature herself are outraged, her harmony is disrupted, and emotional chaos results. The reader is sustained in this elemental atmosphere with effortless power throughout the book. It is said to be badly arranged, but it is not of the slightest consequence if it is. And the narrative device of the story being reported, which some critics find very clumsy, seems to me a definite triumph. It adds something really significant to its quality that we should hear this tale of elemental passion and cruelty through the mouth of that pattern of solid integrity and common sense, Nellie Dean. The story is so absolutely secure against alien interference

that it is proof against Nellie or the prosaic Mr. Lockwood or all the practical details of living of which it is full. Instead of clashing with its prevailing atmosphere, these things are simply absorbed into it, and enrich it, while they lose none of their own identity. Throughout, the dialogue will move, with the utmost ease and assurance, from the plane of ordinary conversation to the heights of tragic intensity. Cathy and Nellie will be talking about Cathy's approaching marriage to Edgar Linton like any young girl and an intimate maidservant:

'Why do you love him, Miss Cathy?'

'Well, because he is handsome and pleasant . . . and he will be rich and I shall like to be the greatest woman of the neighbourhood.'

and by the end of the conversation Cathy is crying out that Linton's soul is as different from hers as a moonbeam from lightning or frost from fire, and of Heathcliff:

'I *am* Heathcliff! . . . If all else perished and *he* remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger.'

In one paragraph alone it can be done, as when Nellie tells Heathcliff how wicked it was of him to have Cathy's coffin uncovered when Edgar Linton's grave was dug beside it. 'Were you not ashamed to disturb the dead?' she exclaims, and he replies:

'I disturbed nobody, Nellie, and I gave some ease to myself. I shall be a great deal more comfortable now; and you'll have a better chance of keeping me underground, when I get there. Disturbed her? No! she has disturbed me, night and day, through eighteen years—incessantly—remorselessly—till yesternight; and yesternight I was tranquil. I dreamt I was sleeping the last

sleep by that sleeper, with my heart stopped and my cheek frozen against hers.'

It is a book of unforgettable dramatic moments. Cathy and Heathcliff defying and screaming at Edgar Linton in the parlor at Thrushcross Grange: the dying Cathy, clinging to Heathcliff and sobbing,

'I wish I could hold you till we were both dead! I shouldn't care what you suffered. I care nothing for your sufferings. Why shouldn't *you* suffer? I do.'

Heathcliff's frightful cry as Nellie Dean tells him of her last moments,

'I pray one prayer—I repeat it till my tongue stiffens—Catherine Earnshaw, may you not rest as long as I am living! You said I killed you—haunt me, then! . . . Be with me always—take any form—drive me mad! only *do* not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you! Oh, God! it is unutterable! I *cannot* live without my life! I *cannot* live without my soul!'

or the scene where Mr. Lockwood declares he has been put to sleep in a haunted room, and Heathcliff wrenches open the lattice,

bursting, as he pulled at it, into an uncontrollable passion of tears. 'Come in! Come in!' he sobbed. 'Cathy, do come. Oh do—*once* more! Oh! my heart's darling! hear me *this* time, Catherine, at last!' . . . but the snow and wind whirled wildly through . . . blowing out the light.

There is no explanation for this sort of writing except the possession of genius, but there is one clear way in which Emily Brontë does definitely bind her human world to the measure of something larger and stronger and more stable than human standards, and that is, by extending its passions, its calms, its struggles into kinship with the elemental life of Nature. Charlotte Brontë

does it too, in a much cruder and more obvious way, and we cannot think of either of them apart from those forces which they both felt to be a part of their very blood and being. Charlotte gets most of her effects by descriptive passages with a clear symbolic significance behind them, but Emily is far more dramatic and subtle. In *Wuthering Heights* there is, of course, the simple symbolic value of the wind which howls and rages so often round it; of those few slanting, stunted firs at the end of the house, and the range of gaunt thorns, all stretching their limbs one way, as if craving alms of the sun; or the faint gleam of the golden crocuses which Edgar lays on his wife's pillow. But Emily can create finer effects than those. All the contrast between the happy love of Catherine and Heathcliff in their childhood, and the half-mad agony of Catherine when Heathcliff returns and forces himself again into her life, is in the scene where, in her frenzy of hysteria, she tears her pillow with her teeth, and begins arranging the feathers on the sheet.

'That's a turkey's,' she murmured to herself, 'and this is a wild duck's; and this is a pigeon's. . . . And here is a moor-cock's; and this—I should know it among a thousand—it's a lapwing's. Bonny bird; wheeling over our heads in the middle of the moor. It wanted to get to its nest, for the clouds had touched the swells, and it felt rain coming. This feather was picked up from the heath, the bird was not shot: we saw its nest in the winter, full of little skeletons. Heathcliff set a trap over it, and the old ones dare not come. I made him promise he'd never shoot a lapwing after that, and he didn't. . . .

'Oh, if I were but in my own bed in the old house!' she went on bitterly, wringing her hands. 'And that wind sounding in the firs by the lattice. Do let me feel it—it comes straight down the moor—do let me have

one breath. . . . I wish I were a girl again, half savage, and hardy, and free; and laughing at injuries, not maddening under them! Why am I so changed? why does my blood rush into a hell of tumult at a few words? I'm sure I should be myself were I once among the heather on those hills. . . .'

Or the elemental quality of Cathy's passionate nature, and the hopelessness of its mating with Edgar, are suggested by images which carry the thought beyond the merely human:

'as well plant an oak tree in a flower pot and expect it to thrive' . . . 'the sea could as easily be contained in that horse trough. . . .'

Finally, the 'calm of mind, all passion spent' of the beautiful ending, is the eternal peace of death and of a perfect summer evening.

I sought, and soon discovered, the three headstones on the slope next the moor: the middle one grey, and half buried in heath: Edgar Linton's only harmonised by the turf and moss creeping up its foot; Heathcliff's still bare.

I lingered round them, under that benign sky; watched the moths fluttering among the heath and harebells, listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass, and wondered how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth.

## §

AS LONG as the 'life' which the novelist felt he must transmit to others was mainly concerned with man's relation to the world he lives in, and to his fellow human beings—as long, that is, as the aim of the novel was mainly a social one—the technique which had been gradually evolved from Fielding to Arnold Bennett was

adequate to express it. The changes which developed in the course of time were refinements in the arrangement and presentation of material, but the material itself remained constant. Every novelist looked at it with an individual pair of eyes, that was all. Even when Henry James discovered the secret of exposing the drama of the unspoken in the life of characters in fiction, he only used it for the creation of a design of social inter-relationships bound into a definite plot. There is nothing free about the individual sensibility of a Henry James character; only so much of its inner life is revealed as is necessary for the completed pattern. It is always concerned with the matter in hand: its thought processes are logical and coherent.

Conrad transmitted his sense of the elusiveness of life by a subtle and complicated handling of time sequences, which is peculiarly his own. He loved to create the same situation mirrored in many different minds at different periods; to see the same person in many poses from many different angles. And he loved to tell his story at several removes from the main actors in it, and from the present in which they are living: so much so indeed, that at one point in *Chance* we are listening to what Marlow said that Mrs. Fyne said that Flora said the governess said!

But Conrad, too, is concerned with man's relation to society: it was Proust who first showed the fascination of the vision of man's relation to himself.

Naturally, man's memory of his own past has always been the subject matter of fiction.

My school-days! The silent gliding on of my existence—the unseen, unfelt progress of my life—from childhood up to youth! Let me think, as I look back upon that flowing water, now a dry channel overgrown with leaves, whether there are any marks along its course, by which I can remember how it ran.



This is how Dickens approaches the subject, and the result is, as always with Dickens, a marvellous series of sharp-edged dramatic scenes. Or again, Dickens, and all of us, know very well that trick of associative memory, which is the basis of Proust's method in *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*.

There was a table, and a Dutch clock, and a chest of drawers, and on the chest of drawers was a tea-tray with a painting on it of a lady with a parasol taking a walk with a military-looking child who was trundling a hoop. . . . On the walls, there were some common-coloured pictures, framed and glazed, of Scripture subjects; such as I have never seen since in the hands of pedlars, without seeing the whole interior of Peggotty's brother's house again, at one view.

But no one before Proust used the memory of a single individual as the focus for an entire vision of life, and the central unity of a great work of art. And by some magic of his own, he manages to do this without the loss of any of the sense of universality. Life appears complete in that revelation of a single consciousness; for its vision of the world it lives in, wide in itself, is enormously extended and enriched by its patient unfolding of its own life of sensation and thought. The worlds of novel and diary are united into one in the hands of a great artist.

The artistic world of the other great innovator among modern novelists, James Joyce, is entirely different. Proust is personal and descriptive in his method; Joyce is dramatic. He is not dramatic in the sense that Dickens is, needless to say: he never creates anything approaching a scene in the theatre. He has no interest in action; his art is purely static; but it is dramatic because the whole technique of *Ulysses* is based on the revelation of character—or of consciousness, rather—through a

method created by Joyce himself, which is entirely independent of any conscious coloring of the personality of the author.

Joyce sees human consciousness as the succession of an infinite series of moments of sensation. Some of these moments are the result of direct sense perceptions, some are consciously formulated thoughts, some are the result of memory, some are purely unconscious reactions. All these fleeting moments lose their quality, he thinks, if they are 'described,' and his technique consists in trying to *evoke* their quality by the power of words and images (that is, by a *poetic* use of language), instead of describing them by any logical use of language.

These instants of sensation are, of course, discontinuous and incoherent and eccentric; hence they cannot be communicated in any external formal design. The unity in them is something much harder to come by. It is a certain rhythmical movement which dwells in them, which determines their character and duration, and thus creates 'personality.' (Virginia Woolf conveyed the same sense in a much simplified form in *The Waves*.) The technical device by which he suggests this is a series of symbols and themes which recur at intervals in the thought processes of Daedalus and Bloom; and they are projected in a technique reminiscent of the cinema. The scale constantly shifts, the picture expands and contracts, the vision is sometimes normal, sometimes distorted, as the focus of the camera changes. To the exceptional reader this brings a vividly fresh and immediate impression of living consciousness (though the vision of experience given by *Ulysses* does not, I think, bear *very* much relation to that of most of us); while to the precise interpreter of it, the whole is apparently a vast symphonic poem with a profound satiric intent, and with a rigid technique controlling and directing its complex creation of recurrent rhythms. To the average

reader, however, the effect of the book is to give a sense of the total disintegration of life.

Indeed, most of us are far too solidly rooted in the world of practical living and direct human relationship to enjoy a complete shift in the novel to a world of pure consciousness. We feel instinctively that we do not *want* the novel to become something else, something unrelated to life as we feel it and recognize it. We do not want it to become a mere psychological document. We enjoy an *extension* of its normal experiences, but not a *substitution* of something else for them.

Hence, to the general reader, the work of John Dos Passos, for example, is of greater interest than that of Joyce. He is a disciple of Joyce in a great deal of his writing—notably in the sections called 'The Camera Eye' in the unfinished novel of which the first two parts only have been published—but he uses many other ways of writing, and his vision, though not so profound, is far more varied and comprehensive.

Like Joyce, Dos Passos sees life as a vast succession of impressions, but he allows these impressions to be described as well as to be evoked by his use of symbolism. *Manhattan Transfer* is a collection of moments in the lives of a large company of persons, many of whom have no relationship at all to the central figures in the book. These moments, and the quality of the persons who live them, stream across the consciousness of the reader with kaleidoscopic variation. They form no regular pattern of plot, and the story which spins itself out of the life of each individual must be put together from the fleeting glimpses which is all we are permitted to catch. We see a child talking to her father on a bench: then we meet her next in a train with a man, who says, 'You're my wife now, Elaine,' and so we know she is grown up and married. Dates have to be deduced from topical allusions, and we are whirled bewilderingly from

place to place, from high to low, from group to group, in homes and offices, ships and hospitals, restaurants, shops and streets.

This disintegration of material is a symbol of the disintegration of the society depicted. For wherever we find ourselves we meet the same standards. Against a background of jazz, lust, drink, noise, glare, stench, greed, grab, graft and publicity, everyone is scrambling after the same selfish ambitions—success, money, ‘the delusion of power. . . . Women fall for it like hell,’ ‘getting ahead.’ There are faint gleams of human aspiration, of moral and emotional beauty, and definite reminders in the chapter headings of the exquisite physical beauty of day and night and general environment in the midst of which this life plays itself out. But they are all blotted out by the blind and brutal monotony of a world without religion or serenity or art or culture or permanence or peace or moral passion.

Criss-cross glances, sauntering hips, red jowls masticating cigars, sallow, concave faces, flat bodies . . . paunched bodies . . . all elbowing, shoving, shuffling, fed in two endless tapes through the revolving doors. . . .

‘I guess all he needs is to go to work and get a sense of values,’ says one of these characters of another: and the irony of it is left to speak for itself.

At the end of the book, Jimmy Herf, whose standpoint is presumably that of the author himself, walks out of this life and into the unknown, but we have no positive statement of what his own values are, though they are implied clearly enough in the body of the book. It is this lack of positive human standards that is the quarrel which many readers have with the modern novel. They complain that it never ‘gets you anywhere’ (with the exception of the work of H. G. Wells, which

gets you to a different place every time!), that Joyce, Huxley, Hemingway, Faulkner and Sinclair Lewis, all so obsessed with the horrors of contemporary civilization, do nothing beyond revealing these horrors over and over again; and that these satirists of the modern world give no sense of caring any more themselves for the brotherhood of man, and the achievement of an organic society, than any of the characters they satirize.

This is quite true, and is an illustration of the fact that we cannot divorce the novel from moral preoccupations, or feel satisfied with mere skilful and interesting technique. We admire Faulkner's uncanny touch in suggesting the insane, or the abnormal, or the primitive consciousness; we praise Hemingway's power of implying the degrees of futility in characters whose most positive moral flight is to say, 'You know it makes one feel rather good deciding not to be a bitch'; we admit Huxley's skill in the contrapuntal handling of human themes, but we do not want to be very long in the literary society of any of them. It is probably because Dos Passos, in spite of the bitterness of his cynicism, leaves the impression of a pitiful and a positive personality behind his creations, that his work appears of greater significance than that of any other modern American novelist; and it is for the same reason that a similar position in England is held by Virginia Woolf.

Her range is much smaller than that of Dos Passos: indeed her human territory is almost as limited as that of Jane Austen, and small groups of people among the upper middle classes are all she uses as material. But within her limitations she is the most patient and perfect of artists; the most intuitive and irradiating. Her own personality is one of the most sympathetic and accomplished among writers of fiction. She said of Addison that he was always on the side of sense, taste and civilization, and it applies much more to herself. She has the

most lovely, luminous mind, and the most delicate and mobile sensibility. In *To the Lighthouse*, which is my own favorite among the novels, we find ourselves in a perfectly familiar world. It is a world of knitting stockings and cutting sandwiches and cooking vegetables; of saving up to pay for the greenhouse roof, of shopping and picnics and putting children to bed. Her characters are all part of a web of normal human relationships; beautiful emotions, ugly emotions, above all, mysterious and inexplicable emotions bind them all one to another. But what makes the world created in this work of art unique is the way in which it is communicated to the reader. It is not described directly; nor are we made aware of the characters through the houses they live in or the whole social background against which they live. Everything about them is revealed to us *as they live from moment to moment*. All their memory of the past, as well as all their awareness of the present, flows into the reader's mind from that source. What a lot of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay we know from the few moments we spend with them on an evening walk.

They turned away from the view and began to walk up the path where the silver-green spear-like plants grew, arm in arm. His arm was almost like a young man's arm, Mrs. Ramsay thought, thin and hard, and she thought with delight how strong he still was, though he was over sixty, and how untamed and optimistic, and how strange it was that being convinced, as he was, of all sorts of horrors, seemed not to depress him, but to cheer him. Was it not odd, she reflected? Indeed he seemed to her sometimes made differently from other people, born blind, deaf, and dumb, to the ordinary things, but to the extraordinary things, with an eye like an eagle's. His understanding often astonished her. But did he notice the flowers? No. Did he notice the view? No. . . . He would sit at table with them like a person

in a dream. And his habit of talking aloud, or saying poetry aloud, was growing on him, she was afraid; for sometimes it was awkward—

Best and brightest, come away!

poor Miss Giddings, when he shouted that at her, almost jumped out of her skin. But then, Mrs. Ramsay, though instantly taking his side against all the silly Giddingses in the world, then, she thought, intimating by a little pressure on his arm that he walked up hill too fast for her, and she must stop for a moment to see whether those were fresh mole-hills on the bank, then, she thought, stooping down to look, a great mind like his must be different in every way from ours. . . . It might be a rabbit; it might be a mole. Some creature anyhow was ruining her Evening Primroses. And looking up, she saw above the thin trees the first pulse of the full-throbbing star, and wanted to make her husband look at it; for the sight gave her such keen pleasure. But she stopped herself. He never looked at things. If he did, all he would say would be, Poor little world, with one of his sighs.

At that moment, he said, 'Very fine,' to please her, and pretended to admire the flowers. But she knew quite well that he did not admire them, or even realise that they were there. It was only to please her. . . . Ah, but was not that Lily Briscoe strolling along with William Bankes. . . . Yes, indeed it was. Did not that mean that they would marry? Yes, it must! What an admirable idea! They must marry!

But though the vision of life in *To the Lighthouse* is that of a succession of such passing moments, seen through the consciousness of one or other of the characters, or directly through that of the author, she does not leave either her vision of life itself, or her revelation of it in her art, disintegrated or chaotic. In a sense, *To the Lighthouse* is also a novel on the theme of time. We have the same enveloping sense of its inexorable move-

ment as we get in *The Old Wives' Tale* by such very different means, of the way it drops leaf upon leaf, fold upon fold on human beings, softly, ceaselessly. But just as the essence of art is, by the creation of Form, to give an impression of eternal symmetry and stability to the amorphous experiences of life, so the essence of life itself (says Virginia Woolf), is to integrate itself into moments which hold, too, within themselves an impression of eternal symmetry and stability. Mrs. Ramsay, presiding at her dinner table, has a moment of such revealing insight:

Everything seemed right. Just now (but this cannot last, she thought, dissociating herself from the moment while they were all talking about boots) just now she had reached security; she hovered like a hawk suspended; like a flag floated in an element of joy which filled every nerve of her body fully and sweetly, not noisily, solemnly rather, for it arose, she thought, looking at them all eating there, from husband and children and friends; all of which rising in this profound stillness (she was helping William Bankes to one very small piece more and peered into the depths of the earthenware pot) seemed now for no special reason to stay there like a smoke, like a fume rising upwards, holding them safe together. . . . There it was, all round them. It partook, she felt, carefully helping Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece, of eternity; as she had already felt about something different once before that afternoon; there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; . . . Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that remains for ever after. This would remain.

Whether we agree or disagree with this philosophy, its presence in the book, fusing all its themes, unifying



all its emotional variety, gives it coherence and completeness as a work of art, and it is the lack of any such integrating vision of life which has made the work of so many of the new experimenters in the technique of fiction seem trivial and unsatisfying.



## EPIC AND NARRATIVE POETRY

TO MOST of us the word 'epic' suggests Homer, and not Homer in the original, but through the medium of some translation. The scope of this book does not allow a detailed discussion of any translations, but it is impossible not to say something of the epics which have created all subsequent ideas about that form of poetry, and which immutably fixed its type.

No doubt *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were preceded by a large body of oral poetry, war ballads and such-like, recited or sung by minstrels in the houses of the chiefs whose ancestors they celebrated, and handed down from generation to generation by verbal tradition. Odysseus declares that he thinks these recitals are among the chief joys of life:

Verily it is a good thing to list to a minstrel such as this, like to the gods in voice. Nay, as for me, I say that there is no more gracious or perfect delight than when a whole people makes merry, and the men sit orderly at feast in the halls and listen to the singer, and the tables by them are laden with bread and flesh, and a wine-bearer drawing the wine serves it round and pours it into the cups. This seems to me well-nigh the fairest thing in the world.

These folk ballads provided a body of epic material, just as in England some two thousand years later the Arthurian legends provided a body of epic material, but in prehistoric Greece the appearance of a great poet, or perhaps of two great poets, with the Greek genius for

symmetry and proportion and grace, transformed this material into two living and imperishable works of art.

The action, characters and background of the poems are those of what we vaguely call the Heroic Age. The figures of heroes and gods, created simply and without any psychological subtlety, play their parts in camps and battlefields full of heroic fighting, or in courts and homes full of feasting and hospitality on an equally heroic scale. Action is the mainspring of life: the men fight and travel and administer their lands, and the women spin and weave and wash and tend their homes. The writing lives in its vivid, picturesque quality. If we think of Homer, we think of a scene such as that of the Trojan watchfires.

Even as when in heaven the stars about the bright moon shine clear to see, when the air is windless, and all the peaks appear, and the tall headlands and glades, and from heaven breaketh open the infinite air, and all stars are seen, and the shepherd's heart is glad; even in like multitudes between the ships and the streams of Xanthos appeared the watchfires that the Trojans kindled in front of Ilios. A thousand fires burned in the plain and by the side of each sate fifty in the gleam of blazing fire. And the horses champ'd white barley and spelt, and standing by the chariots waited for the throned Dawn.

Or of that of Nausicaa and her maidens washing.

Now when they were come to the beautiful stream of the river, where the bright water welled up free from beneath, and flowed past, enough to wash the foulest garments clean, there the girls unharnessed the mules from under the chariot, and turning them loose, they drove them along the banks of the eddying river to graze on the honey-sweet clover. Then they took the garments from the wain, in their hands, and bore them to the black water, and briskly trod them down in the

trenches, in busy rivalry. Now when they had washed and cleansed all the stains, they spread all out in order along the shore of the deep, even where the sea, in beating on the coast, washed the pebbles clean. Then having bathed and anointed them well with olive oil, they took their mid-day meal on the river's banks, waiting till the clothes should dry in the brightness of the sun.

Or of the racy, Robinson Crusoe-ish realism of the story of the outwitting of the Cyclops, with its vivid details of exactly how he milked his goats and set his cheeses to drain 'all orderly'; and exactly how he cracked the skulls of his victims and supped off them to the last shred; followed by the swift, supple narrative of the blinding and the escape.

But though it is endless incidents of this sort, and exquisite little pictures by the way, of sea and birds and flowers and jewellery and clothes and interiors, which jump to the memory when we think of *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey*, they are not just collections of stirring stories and excellent descriptions. 'The noble and profound application of ideas to life is the most essential part of poetic greatness,' said Matthew Arnold, and behind the stories and descriptions of Homer there is a mind which sees and feels in these detached incidents of men's experience a picture of the destiny of the human race; which concentrates in them a complete, if primitive vision of human life. 'This is the lot the gods have spun for miserable men, that they should live in pain; yet themselves are sorrowless.' So says Achilles, and indeed, all the mortals in Homer are the sport of gods and goddesses who organize their fates according to their own private wishes and personal favoritisms. But it is Virgil who sums up the epic values. 'For all men the period of life is short and not to be recalled, but to spread glory by deeds, that is what valour can do.' The author of the Homeric poems accepts the general circumstances of his

time, but from his picture of that bygone civilization there emerges a sense of a central significance which he feels within all human existence. The subject matter of *The Iliad* is the life of war, with all its practical implications and consequences; the subject matter of *The Odyssey* is the life of personal adventure, and its opposite, the longing for home and safety: and in all this, which includes in its scope the whole experience of man, the poet symbolizes his attitude to living, creating in illustration after illustration his conviction that the ultimate moral and emotional value of life is the courage with which it is lived, in the face of the inscrutable power of the gods and the inexorable end of death.

## §

THE classical epic is the root from which all European narrative poetry springs, but in its growth and development it puts out as many branches as there are ways of telling a story in verse, and the examples of the true epic tradition become rarer and rarer as civilization becomes more and more complex, and literary art more and more sophisticated.

It is clear that the great days of the story-teller in verse are the ages when the reading public does not exist; the days when court or camp or household depended for their literary amusement on the professional bard or minstrel. So, in England, the old epic of *Beowulf* must have become familiar, with its mixture of history and legend, fact and fable; its central heroic figure of Beowulf, the noble fighter, the wise councillor, the loyal friend; and its call to courage in the face of a fate as bleak and comfortless as the atmosphere of cold, grey fog and the mists of the marshes which envelop it. So, too, must the old ballads, the epics of the common folk, have circulated in the countryside, with their records

of famous local heroes such as Robin Hood, of famous local battles such as Chevy Chase, and of macabre or romantic incidents such as the tale of Rendel or of the nut-brown maid. So, too, must the romances, introduced by the French conquerors of the land, have become popular. Here the whole human atmosphere, as well as the character of the background, has become changed. The old epic material of warfare and wandering, of talk between heroes, and individual combats with men and monsters, evidently loses its hold on the interest of the audience, and is replaced, or enlarged, by all the stuff of chivalry. Women and love, and the whole romantic code which made them the center of the new ideal, usurp the stage. There is no characterization in the new narrative fashion, but there is all the clarity and color which *Beowulf* completely lacks. Shadowy scenes and vague outlines give place to vivid vignettes of sport, ritual, tournament and revelry. It is not as literature we look at these romances, indeed; it is as tapestry, or as the colors in an illuminated missal. Sunlight glitters on shields and helmets, flowers bloom in gay gardens, blood 'blinks' on the snow, sun and moon both give their radiance, the sky is blue and the grass green, while within doors the candlelight gleams on the golden hair of lovely ladies, and on the rich stuff of their dresses and the soft glow of their jewels.

It would be idle to pretend that any modern audience could possibly enjoy the vast bulk of the early romance literature as reading matter. The evenings in the medieval castle were long, social intercourse was difficult, roads and conveyances rudimentary and amusements few. The most important thing about the entertainment provided by the minstrel to lighten this monotonous isolation was that it should be lengthy. Form was of no consequence at all—economy and arrangement alike unnecessary. It did not much matter how bizarre and

incongruous the incidents were, how monotonous the adventures, how improbable the encounters, as long as the recital of them filled up a certain number of hours.

It was Chaucer who gave artistic unity to the material of medieval romance, and who showed in *The Knight's Tale* how that material could be condensed and arranged and presented with the cunning use of light and shade, of perspective and proportion. The material, however, remained as wooden and inhuman as ever. But in *Troilus and Criseyde*, in spite of its intolerable length for the modern reader, he illustrated how the romance world could really be peopled with human beings. Troilus, it is true, is just the same parfit gentil knight as Palamon or Arcite, but Criseyde, dark, sideways-glancing, sensual, beautiful and plausible, selfish and shallow, is no typical romantic heroine with yard-long plaits of golden hair and lips red as a rose. And Pandarus, with his officiousness and his feeble jokes, his bromidic platitudes and his apologetic 'cophes,' comes straight out of the world of satiric comedy. Chaucer brought romance to the level of everyday life and the standards of reality. He looked at it with the eyes of the man of the world and left it to future ages as the material for drama as much as for epic.

When it was handled again by a great artist in words, it lives in yet another atmosphere. Spenser wrote when the Renaissance had flooded men's consciousness with a whole range of new artistic and sensuous values, and his picture of the Bowre of Blisse illustrates them very well, with its little lake, paved with jasper and set about with the dark laurel trees, which emphasize the whiteness of the girls' naked bodies bathing in it.

Sometimes the one would lift the other quight  
Above the waters, and then downe againe  
Her plong, as over-maystered by might,

Where both awhile would coverèd remaine,  
 And each the other from to rise restraine;  
 The whiles their snowy limbes, as through a vele,  
 So through the christall waves appearèd plaine:  
 Then suddenly both would themselves unhele,  
 And th' amarus sweet spoiles to greedy eyes revele.

How different from Chaucer, with his chivalrous reserve:

This Emelye with herte debonaire  
 Hir body wesshe with water of a welle;  
 But how she did her rite I dare nat telle . . .

To put this beside Spenser's Bowre of Blisse, and the background of Spenser beside the clear red and white flowers in Emelye's garden in *The Knight's Tale*, or the formal shady alleys and sanded paths in Criseyde's, is to compare the vivid, flat coloring of an illuminated manuscript with a Botticelli.

But Spenser, too, suffered from the prolixity and verbosity which seem to be almost inseparable from romance themes, and in England it is not until the tales of chivalry again became a fashionable subject for narrative poetry three hundred years later, that we find romance treated with a sense of style. Perhaps *The Eve of St. Agnes* is really the perfect medieval romance! It has achieved the atmosphere of the real thing without its manifold weaknesses. It tells a fairy-tale perfectly. It makes no effort at human verisimilitude; it concentrates itself on the quality which makes the great appeal of the medieval convention—the picturesque. There is no poem in the English language where words are made to do the work of paint and music so triumphantly as they are in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, no poem where they create every kind of sense suggestion with such matchless vividness, and combine and contrast them with such consummate skill.

The first four stanzas create the background for the



whole. At once the reader delivers himself, with a sigh of complete confidence, into the hands of a supreme artist in the picturesque. He sees the shivering animals in the snowy landscape, the frosted breath of the beadsman, the sculptured dead, aching in icy hoods and mails, the carved angels 'with hair blown back, and wings put crosswise on their breasts.' He hears the burst of argent revelry, the golden music, yearning like a god in pain, and the chiding of the silver-snarling trumpets. The human figures, too, are conceived and presented entirely in terms of sight and sound, of touch and taste. Madeline, 'hoodwink'd with faery fancy,' watching with downcast eyes the sweeping trains of the revellers: Porphyro, with 'purple riot' in his heart, in that little pale, lattic'd, chill moonlight room: old Angela feeling for the stair with her palsied hand; and finally the scene in Madeline's room, which is the very sum and zenith and apex and pinnacle of all we mean by the word romance.

A casement high and triple-arch'd there was,  
 All garlanded with carven imag'ries  
 Of fruits and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,  
 And diamonded with panes of quaint device,  
 Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,  
 As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings;  
 And in the midst, 'mong thousand heraldries,  
 And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings,  
 A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and kings.

Full on this casement shone the wintry moon,  
 And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast,  
 As down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon;  
 Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest,  
 And on her silver cross soft amethyst,  
 And on her hair a glory, like a saint:  
 She seem'd a splendid angel, newly drest,  
 Save wings, for heaven:—Porphyro grew faint:  
 She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint.

Soon, trembling in her soft and chilly nest,  
 In sort of wakeful swoon, perplex'd she lay,  
 Until the poppi'd warmth of sleep oppress'd  
 Her soothed limbs, and soul fatigued away;  
 Flown, like a thought until the morrow-day;  
 Blissfully haven'd both from joy and pain;  
 Clasp'd like a missal where swart Paynims pray  
 Blinded alike from sunshine and from rain,  
 As though a rose should shut, and be a bud again.

. . . . .

Then by the bedside, where the faded moon  
 Made a dim, silver twilight, soft he set  
 A table, and, half anguish'd, threw thereon  
 A cloth of woven crimson, gold and jet:—  
 O for some drowsy Morphean amulet!  
 The boisterous, midnight, festive clarion,  
 The kettle-drum and far-heard clarionet,  
 Affray his ears, though but in dying tone:—  
 The hall door shuts again, and all the noise is gone.

And still she slept an azure-lidded sleep,  
 In blanched linen, smooth and lavender'd,  
 While he from forth the closet brought a heap  
 Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;  
 With jellies soother than the creamy curd,  
 And lucent syrops, tinct with cinnamon;  
 Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd  
 From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,  
 From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon.

## §

IT MAY be objected to this kind of poetry, that it is very limited in its appeal and has no human interest. This is perfectly true. I know no narrative poem in the whole range of English and American literature in whose characters one takes more than the faintest degree of real interest. If one does, as in *Troilus and Criseyde* or *The*

*Ring and the Book*, one wishes the material were presented in the form of drama or prose fiction and not in verse. But the truth is, one does not read narrative poetry for that kind of interest. The pleasure of reading it is the pleasure of partaking of one sort or another of literary artifice, and the way to enjoy such poems is to regard them as 'period pieces' and to study them purely as works of art.

Nowadays, the general interest in psychology and the development of prose fiction into the complex and sensitive instrument it now is, have killed the interest in the subject matter of narrative poetry for the mature reader. Not, of course, for the adolescent reader. Most of us pass through a stage—and a very excellent stage it is too—in the development of our taste, when we get a real thrill from reading *Marmion* and *The Lays of Ancient Rome*, from the Eastern tales of Byron and *The Earthly Paradise*: even (let us whisper) from *The Idylls of the King*! But the taste for second-rate narrative poetry, whether it is the poetry of Tennyson or of Morris or of Masefield, is an unsophisticated taste; we grow out of it. But we never grow out of the enjoyment of watching a great artist in words use his medium with supreme skill in the creation of situation or picture.

In a poem such as Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, for instance, what captivates the imagination of the reader is not the fable (which he knows already), or the personalities of the actors in it (which are quite null and void), but the pleasure of seeing a superb example of a particular type of the poetry of embellishment—of that gorgeous and sensuous Renaissance fashion of writing, which reminds him of the qualities of a Cellini cup or of the glories of the exterior staircase at the château of Blois.

Leander now like Theban Hercules,  
 Entred the orchard of th' Hesperides,  
 Whose fruit none rightly can describe but hee  
 That puls or shakes it from the golden tree:  
 And now she wisht this night were never done,  
 And sigh'd to think upon th' approaching sunne,  
 For much it greev'd her that the bright day-light  
 Should know the pleasure of this blessed night. . .  
 And fain by stealth away she would have crept,  
 And to some corner secretly have gone,  
 Leaving Leander in the bed alone.  
 But as her naked foot was whipping out,  
 He on the suddaine cling'd her so about,  
 That Meremaid-like unto the floore she slid,  
 One halfe appear'd, the other halfe was hid.  
 Thus neere the bed she blushing stood upright,  
 And from her countenance behold ye might  
 A kind of twilight breake, which through the heare,  
 As from an orient cloud, glymse here and there.  
 And round about the chamber this false morne  
 Brought foorth the day before the day was borne.  
 So Heroes ruddie cheeks Hero betray'd,  
 And her all naked to his sight display'd . . .  
 By this Apollos golden harp began  
 To sound foorth music to the ocean,  
 Which watchful Hesperus no sooner heard,  
 But he the day bright-bearing car prepar'd,  
 And ran before, as Harbenger of light,  
 And with his flaring beames mockt ougly night,  
 Till she o'ercome with anguish, shame, and rage,  
 Dang'd<sup>1</sup> downe to hell her loathsome carriage.

Or again, take a fashion at the other extreme of poetic convention, Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*. Narrative poetry must always be aimed at a special audience, for its popularity depends upon its pleasing the reading public of the day. *Hero and Leander* was written for a cul-

<sup>1</sup> hurled.

tivated, well-read court audience, with a special taste for Italianate, luxurious and erotic verse. Pope, writing over a hundred years later, aimed at a completely different reading public. Luscious emotional suggestion was no longer the fashion at all: the ideal was a public and social one, the subject matter the personalities of the social and political worlds, and the standard of accomplishment a clever sophistication which anyone of general well-bred intelligence could appreciate. Gossip and scandal are the greatest excitements of the civilized community, just as warfare is of the uncivilized, and Pope is the most brilliant scandal-monger and gossip among poets. *The Rape of the Lock*, moreover, is not only a brilliant satire on the social world, it is an equally brilliant one on the literary world. The eighteenth century, with its passion for 'the ancients,' was very familiar with the whole epic convention. It was particularly rich in bad epics itself, and Pope makes the framework of his poem a parody of the epic tradition. As in it, he creates a hierarchy of supernatural beings who concern themselves with the fates of the chief characters, while the combats, the descriptions, the elaborate similes and images of the serious epic all appear in a burlesque form. It is all very good fun, and would obviously be very much better for its own contemporary society, who knew of the episode which provided its plot, and could point the topical allusions and fix the personalities in a way which is impossible for a modern reader. The modern reader can appreciate with undiminished enjoyment, however, the delicate, brittle perfection of its quality, the formal deftness of its arrangement, its descriptive vigor and skill, and the economy, point and sparkle of its versification. Take the end of the description of Belinda and the statement of the central point of the poem.

If to her share some female errors fall,  
Look on her face, and you'll forget 'em all.

This Nymph, to the destruction of mankind,  
Nourish'd two locks, which graceful hung behind  
In equal curls, and well conspir'd to deck  
With shining ringlets the smooth iv'ry neck.  
Love in these labyrinths his slaves detains,  
And mighty hearts are held in slender chains.  
With hairy springes we the birds betray,  
Slight lines of hair surprise the finny prey,  
Fair tresses man's imperial race ensnare,  
And beauty draws us with a single hair.

Th' advent'rous Baron the bright locks admir'd;  
He saw, he wish'd, and to the prize aspir'd.  
Resolv'd to win, he meditates the way,  
By force to ravish, or by fraud betray;  
For when success a Lover's toil attends,  
Few ask if fraud or force attain'd his ends.

For this, ere Phoebus rose, he had implor'd  
Propitious heav'n, and ev'ry pow'r ador'd,  
But chiefly Love—to Love an Altar built,  
Of twelve vast French Romances, neatly gilt.  
There lay three garters, half a pair of gloves,  
And all the trophies of his former loves;  
With tender Billet-doux he lights the pyre,  
And breathes three am'rous sighs to raise the fire.  
Then prostrate falls, and begs with ardent eyes  
Soon to obtain, and long possess the prize:  
The pow'rs gave ear, and granted half his pray'r,  
The rest, the wind dispers'd in empty air.

## §

*THE Rape of the Lock* is full of echoes of Milton, and it is time to leave the discussion of minor narrative verse, however perfect of its kind, and to say something of the greatest English epic.

After I have been reading *Paradise Lost* I can take up no other poet with satisfaction. . . . Averse as I am to everything relating to theology, and especially the view of it thrown open by this poem, I recur to it incessantly as the noblest specimen in the world of eloquence, harmony and genius.

So Lander summed up his feelings towards Milton, and it is difficult not to agree with him. At the same time, *Paradise Lost* is more praised than read. Modern readers are apt, to put it vulgarly, to find Milton a tough proposition, and the reasons for this are obvious. Not only is his use of language difficult, and his learning so immense that the complete understanding of *Paradise Lost* has been called 'the last reward of consummate scholarship,' but it is impossible for the modern reader to identify himself with Milton's point of view towards his subject matter. The dialectic and argument seem often tedious and dull to our agnostic and hedonistic age; and the actual theology belongs to a scheme of faith now as dead among cultivated readers as the mythologies of Homer or Virgil.

But this view is really somewhat superficial. For the moral framework of *Paradise Lost* is not really a theological one at all. It is a personal one, and the poem, unlike the great epics of the ancient world, is saturated with individual passion. It is Milton himself, and the intellectual and emotional fruit of his own experience of life, which is the central and animating force of the whole poem. He accepts the whole Biblical story of the war in heaven and the fall of the angels; and the history of the creation and of the fall of man, but the story as he tells it is not only enriched and expanded with the whole of his own vast knowledge of ancient and modern learning and literature; it is also affected very radically by his own emotional nature. For instance, Milton's own view of the relationship of men and women

colors the whole creation of the figures of Adam and Eve, and the dramatic and realistic details of their emotional reactions after the Fall; and it is Milton's own conviction of the doom of the world—

X<sup>o</sup>                      so shall the world go on,  
To good malignant, to bad men benign.—

which causes his conventional account of the millenium to ring so false. But above all, it is his admiration for, and belief in, the positive virtues of courage and endurance, in the 'dust and heat' of struggle and failure, which influence the whole poem so profoundly. For Milton was a rebel, with a fiercely independent and unconquerable spirit, with the result that he comes perilously near upsetting the whole balance of his fable when he pours all his own pride and courage, vigor and indomitable determination under defeat, into the figure of the arch-rebel against the Almighty—Satan. Listen to him as he assumes the task of finding Earth and seducing Man from his allegiance to God.

O Progeny of Heaven! Empyrean Thrones!  
With reason hath deep silence and demur  
Seized us, though undismayed. Long is the way  
And hard, that out of Hell leads up to Light.  
Our prison strong, this huge convex of fire,  
Outrageous to devour, immures us round  
Ninefold; and gates of burning adamant,  
Barred over us, prohibit all egress.  
These passed, if any pass, the void profound  
Of unessential Night receives him next,  
Wide-gaping, and with utter loss of being  
Threatens him, plunged in that abortive gulf.  
If thence he scape, into whatever world,  
Or unknown region, what remains him less  
Than unknown dangers, and as hard escape?  
But I should ill become this throne, O Peers,  
And this imperial sovranity, adorned



With splendour, armed with power, if aught proposed  
 And judged of public moment in the shape  
 Of difficulty or danger, could deter  
 Me from attempting. Wherefore do I assume  
 These royalties, and not refuse to reign,  
 Refusing to accept as great a share  
 Of hazard as of honour, due alike  
 To him who reigns, and so much to him due  
 Of hazard more as he above the rest  
 High honoured sits?

But Satan does not quite succeed in upsetting the balance of the whole, and the action remains with all the sinewy strength and resilience of a great piece of architectural planning; secure and confident in the possession of the essential qualities of epic greatness—dignity, clarity, variety and solidity of effect. For without greatness of action there can be no greatness. Matthew Arnold has stated this case better than anyone else. What are the eternal objects of poetry, he asks, in the Preface to his own poems, and he replies that they are human actions, and that the quality of the action is all important. That, he says, is what the Greeks (and we may add, Milton) understood so clearly: and whereas in modern times the tendency is to subordinate the whole to the parts, and to allow the beauties by the way to usurp the chief part of the reader's attention, all really great poetry subordinates the parts to the whole. The action predominates over the expression of it, the expression draws its force directly from the pregnancy of the matter which it conveys. Only in this way, by the penetrating power of some noble and significant plot, can the unity and profundity of impression be won, which is the hallmark of great writing. Nor can the unity of impression be profound unless the pattern of the external action be matched by a universal moral

and emotional pattern by which the whole of the poet's being is penetrated and absorbed.

It is this profound unity of impression which Milton has achieved.

Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit  
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste  
Brought death into the World, and all our woe,  
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man  
. Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,  
Sing, Heavenly Muse . . .

That is the theme, and the central point, the crisis of the whole epic scheme, is that moment in the ninth book . . .

So saying, her rash hand in evil hour  
Forth-reaching to the fruit, she plucked, she eat.  
Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat,  
Sighing through all her works, gave signs of woe  
That all was lost.

Everything else in the poem is shown in its relationship to that supreme moment. The action starts with the birth and idea of the fall of man in the fallen Satan's mind in Hell. Then follows the effect in Heaven of the knowledge that man is to fall, and the offer of the Son of God to be man's redeemer. By the close of the third book the whole scheme is foreshadowed and the *shape* of the action is already ordered in the reader's mind. From then on, it shifts to Earth and is stabilized and harmonized there; and finally, when the consequences of the Fall have been shown, it is finally resolved in the *mind* of man. Adam is humbled and contrite,

Henceforth I know that to obey is best.

and as those two sad figures, with wandering steps and

slow, turn their backs upon the garden, and take their solitary way, it is with the assurance that their disobedience and the knowledge of good and evil has made possible an infinitely larger hope,

A Paradise within thee, happier far.

It is this unity of external design and of the moral order behind it, which creates the overwhelming force of *Paradise Lost*—that sense of grandeur which Dr. Johnson called its 'gigantic loftiness of port.' Whether the reader shares the doctrinal elements in Milton's faith is really of no consequence at all, for in the poem those elements have been fused, with everything else in Milton's nature, into an immortal work of art—'the noblest specimen in the world.' And the reader who is capable of appreciating that will find, like Landor, that his delight in it cannot be touched by any questions of theology.

## §

MATTHEW ARNOLD's argument about the importance of action and of moral impression in poetry is an interesting one in the light of modern developments, for the position of the modern poet in relation to traditional epic material is very different from that of the 'ancients' or of Milton. Heroic qualities remain the same: stories of courage, loyalty and self-sacrifice move mankind now in the same way in which they always have done, but the interests of mankind have nevertheless shifted. We are in an age of individualism. We care more for the problems of the personality than for those of the nation or the race, and though it is obvious that no age of modern civilization could return to the character of the primitive life and faiths upon which the earliest epics are based, or to the character of the concrete theology which Milton could accept, it is never-

theless essential that the interests of that primitive world in the large elemental passions and moral questions should *in some sort* be present, for epic poetry to be possible. The complexities of the modern attitude to life make this very difficult. Elaborate and complicated psychology is the very antithesis of the simplicity of epic outlines. And not only has the character of life, and the study of it, completely changed, but the position of the poet within it has changed too. The poet is now free. He is no longer the servant of any external authority who can control his services, as the professional minstrel was bound to be: nor is he forced to make use of traditional material and to create within the rigid outlines of accepted fact or of an accepted scheme of abstract thought or moral code. But this freedom seems to have proved a hindrance rather than a help to the creation of great narrative poetry. On the one hand, the poet's view of the past, and that of his audience too, is now complicated by questions of symbolism, of scientific truth and historical accuracy which the poets of the past never dreamed of. They were at one with their material, its relation to them was poetic relationship only: its physical, emotional and moral aspects were their own and were fixed and immovable. On the other hand, how is the modern poet to universalize a modern theme, so that it reaches epic significance and dignity? He may analyze and moralize and argue about life and art, and produce *The Testament of Beauty*, or he may create a moving story full of haunting rhythms, like Archibald MacLeish's *Conquistador*, or he may forge a very vigorous, muscular verse narrative, full of body and breath, color and movement, like *John Brown's Body*. No one who enjoys poetry could read *John Brown's Body* without pleasure and interest. I do not know if Stephen Benét has succeeded in tracking down 'the pure elixir, the American thing' which

he tried to capture, but he has certainly written something memorable. It belongs to its own age, it has nothing imitative and second-hand about it, and it is full of simplicity and distinction. Take the scene where Jack Ellyat looks at the sleeping camp at dawn—at the men whom, by day, he hates for their coarseness and dirt of body and mind.

The camp was asleep.

All that length of tents still asleep. He could see through the tents.

He could see all those sleeping, rough, lousy, detested men  
Laden with sleep as with soft, leaden burdens laden,  
Movelessly lying between the brown fawns of sleep  
Like infants nuzzled against the flanks of a doe,  
In quietness slumbering, in a warm quietness. . . .

And he was alone,

And for a moment, could see this, and see them so,  
And, being free, stand alone, and so being free  
To love or hate, do neither, but merely stand  
Above them like sleep and see them with untouched eyes.  
In a while they would wake, and he would hate them again.

But though the poem is full of fine passages, it nevertheless altogether lacks something which the classical epics and Milton possess—that welding of an external action with a background of universal values. The foreground is vivid with actuality:

Black months of war, hard-featured, defeated months  
Between Fair Oaks and Gettysburg,  
What is your tale for this army?  
What do the men,  
So differently gathered for your word to devour,  
Say to your ears, deaf with cannon? . . .

Let us read old letters awhile,  
Let us try to hear  
The thin, forgotten voices of men forgotten

Crying out of torn scraps of paper . . .

. . . in a single voice that says over and over

'It is cold. It is wet. We marched till we couldn't stand up.

It is muddy here. I wish you could see us here.

I wish everybody at home could see us here,

They would know what war is like.'

But any general sweep of thought pattern becomes personal and enfeebled.

I heard the song of breath

And lost it in all sharp voices,

Even my own voice lost,

Lost like a skein of air,

And with it, continents lost

In the great throat of Death. . . .

. . . . .

The continents flow and melt

Like wax in the naked candle,

Burnt by the wick of time.

Where is the breath of the Chaldees,

The dark Minoan breath? . . .

To use an unfashionable word, the poem lacks a soul, just as Wordsworth's *The Excursion* or Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* or Bridges' *Testament of Beauty* lack a body. But if, as Lascelles Abercrombie says, the epic must be 'a summation, *for its time*, of the values of life,' it must include in its scope both nobility and dignity of action and a design of cosmic significance which sets that action against a background larger than itself. Only thus can its form, its totality of effect, possess the power of great poetry.

There is one modern poem which does this: *The Dynasts*.

Hardy called the poem an epic drama, but he declared that it was 'intended simply for mental performance,' so that it is fair to judge it as reading matter only. Its

subject is the Napoleonic campaigns, and its dramatic movement is of the simplest. There is no subtlety, or emphasis on human individualities: men in action is the theme, and the scene ranges over the continent of Europe, in any country, town, battlefield, street or room the poet chooses. There is an equal width and variety of actors, and the stage is crowded with men and women from emperors to yokels and from queens to prostitutes.

The main action is presented in blank verse: blank verse which is not impressive, which, indeed, is deliberately colorless and flat, but which serves to isolate the action from the ordinary prose world and give it dignity and outline. But Hardy's unique effects are gained by his creation of an original framework of abstract thought, in whose intellectual and emotional light we see the whole historical action, and by his use of a number of technical devices which enlarge and intensify the dramatic present of his scenes.

The opening scene, which is in the Overworld, introduces the phantasmal Intelligences which are Hardy's hierarchy of supernatural beings. 'What of the Immanent Will and Its designs?' asks the Shade of the Earth, and the Spirit of the Years replies:

*It works unconsciously, as heretofore,  
Eternal artistries in Circumstance,  
Whose patterns, wrought by rapt aesthetic rote,  
Seem in themselves Its single listless aim,  
And not their consequence.*

. . . . .

Spirit of the Pities

*Why doth It so and so, and ever so,  
This viewless, voiceless Turner of the Wheel?*

The spirits continue their discussion, which ends with a general chorus of Intelligences.

*We'll close up Time, as a bird its van,  
We'll traverse Space, as spirits can,  
Link pulses severed by leagues and years,  
Bring cradles into touch with biers;  
So that the far-off Consequence appears  
Prompt at the heel of foregone Cause.—  
The Prime, that willed ere wareness was,  
Whose Brain perchance is Space, whose Thought its laws,  
Which we as threads and streams discern,  
We may but muse on, never learn.*

In the final chorus of the poem, Hardy voices a very half-hearted hope

*That the rages  
Of the ages  
Shall be cancelled, and deliverance offered from the darts that  
were,  
Consciousness the Will informing, till It fashions all things  
fair!*

But the destiny which presides over the whole action is best illustrated by his image of the

*knitter drowsed  
Whose fingers ply with skilled unmindfulness.*

After the opening scene in the Overworld, Hardy introduces us to one of his technical devices, the stage directions, as it were, for the drama.

The nether sky opens, and Europe is disclosed as a prone and emaciated figure, the Alps shaping like a backbone, and the branching mountain chains like ribs, the peninsula plateau of Spain forming a head. Broad and lengthy lowlands stretch from the north of France across Russia like a grey-green garment hemmed by the Ural mountains and the glistening Arctic Ocean.

The point of view then sinks downwards through space, and draws near to the surface of the perturbed countries, where the peoples, distressed by events which they did not cause, are seen writhing, crawling, heaving, and vibrating in their various cities and nationalities.



Sometimes Hardy will push his device still further and use it to emphasize his phantasmagoric background, as he does in his description of the battle of Austerlitz.

. . . A preternatural clearness possesses the atmosphere of the battle-field, in which the scene becomes anatomized and the living masses of humanity transparent. The controlling Immanent Will appears therein, as a brain-like network of currents and ejections, twitching, interpenetrating, entangling, and thrusting hither and thither the human forms.

The possibilities of ironic effects in creating thus a God's eye view of human actions are obvious, and these descriptive interludes, with the 'dumb show' which frequently follows them, add an extraordinary intensity and vividness to the actual dramatic scenes. Take the scene at Walcheren.

A marshy island at the mouth of the Scheldt, lit by the low sunshine of an evening in late summer. The horizontal rays from the west lie in yellow sheaves across the vapours that the day's heat has drawn from the sweating soil. Sour grasses grow in places, and strange fishy smells, now warm, now cold, pass along. Brass-hued and opalescent bubbles, compounded of many gases, rise where passing feet have trodden the damper spots. At night the place is the haunt of the Jack-lantern.

#### DUMB SHOW

A vast army is encamped here, and in the open spaces are infantry on parade—skeletoned men, some flushed, some shivering, who are kept moving because it is dangerous to stay still. Every now and then one falls down, and is carried away to a hospital with no roof, where he is laid, bedless, on the ground.

In the distance soldiers are digging graves for the funerals which are to take place after dark, delayed till then that the sight of so many may not drive the living melancholy-mad. Faint noises are heard in the air.

The effect of the whole poem—of the choric melodies sung by the spirits, of the prose dumb shows, of the scenic descriptions, and of the dramatic blank verse dialogue and soliloquies, creates a scope and movement which are unique in literature. Its huge sweep generates a peculiar excitement in the reader—an excitement per-

haps analogous to that which the old epics lit in their hearers. For the effect of *The Dynasts* is not the effect of Milton or of any other great work of formal beauty and massiveness. It affects us not only by its plan and its expression, but by its actual subject matter, by the actual truth and thrill of the story it tells. The actors are never more than life size, but the steadiness and solidity with which we see them, the pervasive unity of the point of view which directs them, and the immense width and variety of the scope of the action, create in themselves an impressiveness which can very well hold its own with the moral and physical grandeur of the great epic poems of the past.



## DRAMA

UNLIKE all other forms of literature, the drama does not depend upon the written word only for its effects. Indeed, any drama which attempts to depend on the written word only is of necessity a poor drama; it has impoverished itself of its just artistic possessions. For its full and complete effect a play needs a trinity of creators—author, actors, audience—and the total achievement is an inseparable blend of the three.

For this reason, the drama is the most popular of the arts, in the sense that 'the people' are nearer to it than to any other art. And the great dramatic ages in the history of the world, the fifth century B.C. and the Elizabethan age in England, have been those when all classes of the population have regarded the drama as an essential part of their common life: when they went to the theatre as a matter of course and when the fare presented pleased all sections of the audience, rich and poor, educated and uneducated. But in any age the success of a play depends ultimately upon its immediate collective response from an audience, and the art of the playwright is all directed towards, and centered in, the winning of that. Hence the fullness and subtlety of fine dramatic structure and movement can only be imperfectly grasped by reading: they require a stage to call them into being. Hence, too, the fact that dramatic technique is entirely different from that of any other form of writing.

The subject matter of drama is that of all literature—some form of human experience. But the dramatist

treats his material in a special way. He does not argue about it, or discuss it, or analyze it, like the essayist; or speak of his direct personal emotion about it, like the lyric poet. He tells a story which illustrates it. But the epic poet and the novelist also tell stories, and the difference between them and the dramatist is that the dramatist uses a particular kind of presentation for his story. His whole problem is how to create it, and to convey everything he wants to say about it, or imply about it, by means of actors on a stage, in the space of between two and three hours.

Now the fact that the playwright has to do these things inevitably involves certain obvious points about dramatic form. It cannot be leisurely, diffuse or descriptive like the novel, and it cannot include minute psychological detail. I have been told that there is a certain stage direction in one of Henry James's plays, which runs: *Enter Mrs. So and So, looking as if she has just drunk a cup of tea*: but we may safely say that no successful playwright would demand quite such a difficult feat from any member of his cast! The drama is solely concerned with effects which can be presented on the stage with force and precision. Bernard Shaw says somewhere that 'effectiveness of assertion is the Alpha and Omega of style,' and this is nowhere more true than in the theatre. The art of the drama is the search for methods of communicating assertions about life effectively on the stage, and the history of the theatre is the story of how every original artist has found ways of doing this which shall embody his own peculiar vision of his material, and shall yet produce that spontaneous collective response from an audience on which drama depends.

## §

THE basis of all dramatic technique is the revelation of character in action. It is impossible to have drama unless characters are concerned in some form of complication, and this always involves some clash between individuals, or between opposing forces of emotions or circumstances or ideas. This clash creates the plot of the play. It may be an opposition between individuals, such as Othello and Iago, or Tanner and Ann Whitefield in *Man and Superman*; or between individual character and environment or circumstances, as in *The Three Sisters* or *Justice* or *The Hairy Ape*; or between sides of the character of one human being, as in *Macbeth*; or all these opposites may be involved together, as in *Hamlet*. There may be a collision of modes of will and purpose, as in *Saint Joan*, or of mere facts with other facts, as in *The Way of the World*, or of facts at war with ideas and theories, as in *The Wild Duck* or *Strange Interlude*, or, in a different way, in *The Adding Machine*.

This sense of clash always brings with it a sense of the irony of life, which, though not peculiar to drama, seems to be of its essence. It is impossible to conceive of any of the complications, tragic or comic, in which men and women are involved with character or circumstance, without this reminder of the innate perversity of fate and of human nature and human actions; this discrepancy between reality and men's illusions, the eternal incongruity of things. It is so tragically ironic that a man like Hamlet should be called upon to avenge a murder, and it is so comically ironic that the Irish peasants in *The Playboy of the Western World* should welcome Christy Mahon when they think he has murdered his father, and should think very little of him when they find that he is innocent. It is so ironic that Gregers Werle should ruin the happiness of an entire

family by believing in telling the truth, and that Mrs. Alving should be responsible for her son's disease by denying her own love for Pastor Manders and staying with her husband, and that Hjalmar Ekdal's egotism, which is so exquisitely comic to watch and listen to, should be so very serious in its consequences. It is so ironic that Antony should kill himself on account of a message from Cleopatra which is a lie, and that Juliet should awaken a moment too late: that Othello should trust Iago and distrust Desdemona, and that Lear should scorn Cordelia and believe her sisters. It is so ironic that the real Ann Whitefield should be so different from the idea of her held by Mr. Ramsden and Tavy Robinson, and that Oedipus should have killed Laius and married Jocasta in such pathetic innocence, and that Lydia Languish should be always craving for a love affair full of intrigues and jealousy, while poor Julia's life is being made such a misery by the real jealousy and capriciousness of Faulkner.

The clash of entanglement of action, character or idea created by the dramatist forms the plot of the play, and the function of the plot, which is the most important element in drama, is to present a structure of situation in which the characters are caught and tested and revealed by the circumstances in which they are involved. The characters may, and frequently do, remain in our memory with extreme vividness as individuals, but they do so because of the web of events and action in which the drama has trapped them. It is the course of events which calls forth the quality of behavior in them which we call 'character,' and which makes the essential reality of each individual as he works out his fate according to the dramatist's plan. Each character is there as he is, because of the part he has to play in the piece of action which is the drama, and it is for this reason that the type of criticism which discusses characters

in plays as if they were characters in real life is particularly futile. It is the type of Dickens's Mr. Curdle, who wrote a pamphlet of sixty-four pages on the character of the Nurse's deceased husband in *Romeo and Juliet*! But even the greatest critics do it. When Bradley, for instance, asks, 'How is it that Othello comes to be the companion of the one man in the world who is at once able enough, brave enough and vile enough to ensnare him?', it is really an absurd question. The answer is that Shakespeare created Iago like that in order to ensnare Othello, and created Othello so that he should be ensnared. They are characters in a play, not in real life, and they are as they are because the playwright saw them so.

The action of a play, then, is interwoven, warp and woof, from circumstance and character, by the creative craftsmanship of the dramatist; and the quality of the drama, therefore, like that of all other literature, depends ultimately upon the personality behind it. It is usual to speak of the impersonality of the dramatist, and it is true that there is no direct relationship between playwright and audience as there is between essayist, or novelist, or lyric poet and reader, but nevertheless the dramatist's personality is unmistakable in his work. It is he who chooses the story and determines the angle from which it is to be presented, and the setting and atmosphere in which it is to develop; it is he who selects the incidents and plans the emphases during its course; above all, it is he who creates the characters, who directs their speech and their actions, and who decides their final destinies. Indeed, we have only to compare and contrast in imagination the different flavors of the worlds revealed in the plays, say, of Shakespeare, of Shaw, and of Galsworthy, to realize at once how the individuality of the dramatist inevitably colors everything he writes. The quality and comprehensiveness of his

world, its kind and scale, will depend on the quality and comprehensiveness of his own nature. He may create a small, but very clearly defined atmosphere, such as that of Tchekov; he may create his values by imposing a certain point of view on all his material, as Shaw does; he may create a world from pure verbal style, as Congreve does; he may interest himself almost entirely in the relentless revelation of psychological truth, as Ibsen does, or he may be a great comprehensive spirit like Shakespeare, who seems to include almost everything, and to be inexhaustible.

But the dramatist, needless to say, does not set out to reveal his personality in his plays. Like every other artist, his aim is to give shape and being to certain material in his mind; to order into outline and to create in language a piece of experience. And as we have said, his problem is how to get his story and its implications transferred to the minds of an audience, through the medium of stage representation.

There are always two ways in which human experience can be represented in art: the way of realism and the way of symbolism. In drama, this means that it can be presented directly in actual figures of flesh and blood, or it can be suggested obliquely by the creation of significant images.

In all great plays the two methods are united. The nature of Greek drama, with its creation of characters in the heroic myths and legends into actual figures, made symbolism inevitable, and to the modern, it is only through their symbolic significance that many of the great Greek tragedies can be appreciated today. A problem such as that of *Antigone*, for example, in its realistic aspect, is meaningless to a modern playgoer. *Antigone's* brother *Polynices* has been slain. If she leaves him unburied, she outrages the laws of her religion and the dictates of her humanity; if she buries



him, she disobeys the law of Creon, King of Thebes, and her punishment is death. Such an actual situation is inconceivable to us nowadays, and to arrive at the emotional experiences of the play we symbolize the story as the eternal conflict between the individual conscience and the power of the state: it becomes the problem of every political martyr and conscientious objector of all time.

This expansion of an individual into a type, this sense of the universal behind the particular and the eternal behind the temporal is the touchstone of all great dramatic creations in all ages. Hamlet is an unfortunate prince, trapped by the cursèd spite of destiny into a particular situation to which he feels himself quite unequal. But he is the symbol of every sensitive spirit called upon to cope with unwelcome practical problems. Pastor Manders is a particular narrow, bat-eyed clergyman, who has plunged a whole family into inescapable tragedy by his refusal to face facts, and his pursuit of a rigid code of outworn convention; but he stands for all the authority in the world which refuses to see life as it is, and which continues to rule living spirits by dead values.

There has been a movement in the modern theatre called Expressionism, which has aimed at making the symbolic element dominant in drama. Its exponents try to universalize their themes by foregoing individualized names for their characters, and by labelling them The Man, The Woman, The Nameless One, The Spirit of the Masses, and so on, and they use symbolic formal groups to suggest forces such as Labor or Society. It is an effort to make an abstract drama on the lines of the ideal of abstract form in painting.

The weakness of the form is that its effect is either as in *The Adding Machine*, so simple and obvious that it reminds one of the crudities of the old morality plays

or so elusive as to be unintelligible without interpretation. Toller's *Man and the Masses* requires an analytical program for its comprehension, and Eugene O'Neill, when he made an expressionistic experiment in *The Great God Brown*, found that he had to supply a gloss to explain 'the mystical pattern which manifests itself as an overtone . . . dimly behind and beyond the words and actions of the characters.'

### §

THE symbolism we have been describing thus far has been symbolism inherent in the whole conception of a play, but a smaller use of it, its use as an element in dramatic technique, is one of the most valuable tools in the dramatist's craft. It is, perhaps, natural that details of setting and of by-play should play a subtler part in the drama of today than in that of the past. The nature of the Greek theatre made the use of such detail impossible. Their symbols had to be large and simple, as, for example, when, at the end of *The Trojan Women*, the reality of war, sung by Homer with so much pomp and circumstance, is symbolized by Euripides in the lonely figure of a pitiful old woman, sitting on the ground with a dead child in her arms. Even the Elizabethan stage, with its absence of scenery, and open platform, loosed the bonds of time and place in a way which made the subtle use of detail an impossibility. Poetic drama never depends upon it: it has other tools. But in the plays of Ibsen and Tchekov and of contemporary dramatists, its emotional suggestion and value is constantly emphasized. The footsteps overhead all through the first act of *John Gabriel Borkman*, or the presence, outside the window of the sitting room, of that unseen footbridge over the mill-race which haunts the whole of *Rosmersholm*, are instances; while in the last act of *The Cherry*

*Orchard*, the juxtaposition of the real pain of the departure, with the search for Trofimov's goloshes, creates just that sense of inconsequent frivolity of spirit, side by side with the validity of genuine emotion, which is so typical of the whole action. The goloshes, and their loss *at that moment*, become a symbol of the whole character of the comedy, just as in *Uncle Vanya* the incident of Uncle Vanya shooting at the Professor, *and missing him*, becomes a symbol of the whole character of the tragedy.

Illustrations from the drama of today are the number-covered walls of Mr. Zero's house in *The Adding Machine*, or the puppets who typify the life of Fifth Avenue in *The Hairy Ape*, or the two elm trees in the setting of *Desire under the Elms*, whose symbolism is explained by O'Neill in the stage directions:

They appear to protect and at the same time subdue. There is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing jealous absorption. . . .

The function of symbolism in the technique of a play is really to economize space. The dramatist may use it with great artistry to create effects of contrast, and to enlarge the emotional significance of his speech, but its greatest value is its power to take the place of words. For, as we have seen, the main problem of the playwright is to convey everything for which the novelist can use description, or analysis, or discussion, or explanation, by the sole means of dialogue.

In this task he has the immense asset (unless he is an Expressionist!) of direct interpretation through figures of flesh and blood. His course of events, and the characters which mould and are moulded by it, are *there*, before us. He has no need to describe or explain or analyze them, they can reveal themselves directly as they are. But on the other hand, they *must* reveal themselves,

with force and clarity, and without waste of precious time and space. This means that there must be the minimum of mere action and event which in no way reveals character; and there must be the minimum of incident which merely reveals character, without bearing any vital relation to the plot; and there must be the minimum of the creation of setting and atmosphere for its own sake only.) Again, whenever the audience feels in a play that it is being talked *at*, the dramatist has failed in his task. When Prospero sits down in the first act of *The Tempest*, and tells Miranda the story of his life; or when Sir Peter Teazle explains the position between himself and his wife in a soliloquy, the world of dramatic illusion is shattered, and it is the dramatist's business to keep that illusion intact. It is a world built up with infinite care out of action and speech and suggestion; the blending of character and event and setting into an organic whole. All are interdependent, and it is this interdependence, this organic unity, which is the genius of drama. The scope of its achievement is the measure of the dramatist's success, for the more passion, movement and thought he can compress into his narrow limits, the greater dramatist he will be.

Behind all dramatic technique is the effort to make these narrow limits as wide as they can possibly be. The great example of brilliance in accomplishing this in the modern world is Ibsen. Ibsen always begins his stories immediately before some crisis in the lives of his characters, and he manages to widen the reach of the 'dramatic present' to include all the physical and emotional events of the past which are relevant to this opening situation. The dramatic illusion is never broken, but the dialogue not only distils the essence of the situation and the characters which are before us, but also gradually evokes everything which has made these people what they are, and their story what it is. So

that soon the unseen past is incarnated in the imagination of the audience as vividly as the dramatic present, and becomes a living part of the movement of the actual things seen. This fusion of the inner and outward drama, the present and past, is achieved with a matchless compression and economy of means, and there is no other dramatist who is Ibsen's equal in creating organic structure. We can see the principle at work in the smallest detail of his plotting, and a very good example is given by C. K. Munro in his *Watching a Play*. He points out that at the opening of the third act of *The Wild Duck*, Ibsen makes Gina give a description of Gregers Werle's stupidity about the stove in his room: how he first forgot to open the register and hence filled the room with smoke, and then drenched it with water trying to put the fire out. The description of the incident provides some good comedy, and is also revealing of the general mental obtuseness of Gregers, which is the mainspring of the whole tragedy. But it plays yet another part in the general dramatic structure; for later in the act, Gregers has to have a private conversation with his father on the stage, and without the accident to his room there would be no possible reason for their not going there to have it. So that one little incident provides variety in the dramatic atmosphere, interprets character, and contributes a necessary detail of the mechanism of the stage.

An interesting modern experiment in technique is that of O'Neill in *Strange Interlude*. The soliloquy and the aside were early methods of revealing personality outside the limits of the dialogue, but O'Neill has revived and expanded them in a new and original way in this play. Here the drama of the characters' thoughts accompanies the drama of their speech and actions, so that we listen to both throughout the course of the play. There is no doubt that at the beginning, before

the characters are firmly planted in our imaginations, the device gives a great sense of added richness to the dialogue; and throughout there is an enhanced sense of the psychological cross-currents under the surface of all human relationships. But it is doubtful if O'Neill reveals anything about his characters which an Ibsen could not have conveyed in other and more economical ways, and the interest of the audience in them is exhausted before the end of the nine acts which are required to tell their story.

The strongest effect which is gained, however, though it is worked overtime, is stroke after stroke of that particular kind of ironic comment which is known as 'dramatic irony'—that device by which the audience is made aware of things about the characters and actions on the stage, of which the characters themselves are ignorant. And this device is so powerful because it is bound up with that essential element in dramatic art—the participation of the audience in it. It is above all the quality in stage circumstance which links the audience to the dramatic situation. By it they become, as it were, superior to the action of the play; they know more than the characters on the stage; they are in the confidence of the dramatist himself.)

It is obvious that O'Neill's experiment allows of a very lavish use of this effect, but it is an effect which has always been one of the most telling in the craft of the playwright. The most famous and powerful of all examples of this is in *Macbeth*. 'A little water clears us of this deed,' says Lady Macbeth at the end of the murder scene (in itself a grim ironic stroke for those who know what is coming), and then follows the scene where the porter, utterly oblivious of what has happened, grumbles and jests, and likens himself, all unconscious of the grim truth of his remarks, to the porter of hell-gate. Another example of a similar use of irony

is the scene in the *Electra* of Sophocles, when Aegisthus, thinking to find the slain body of his enemy Orestes, opens the doors of the palace, and after a quibbling dialogue with Electra, where every sentence she speaks bears one meaning to the audience and another to the ignorant Aegisthus—discovers that the body he thinks is Orestes' is that of his paramour Clytemnestra.

Dramatic irony is even more telling in comedy than in tragedy. Indeed, it is impossible to conceive of comedy without it. If we start thinking of the most famous scenes in comedy, we find that they almost always depend on the audience being in a secret which a character on the stage does not share: on the fact that Portia and Rosalind are women, or that the highwaymen on Gadshill are the Prince and Poins, or that Volpone is well and vigorous, or that it is Lady Teazle behind the screen. When Jack Worthing, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, enters in ultra deep mourning and announces the death of his imaginary younger brother, it is the audience's knowledge, and his ignorance, that his friend Algernon has just been impersonating this same young brother to his ward, that makes the situation so exquisitely comic, just as it does in *The School for Scandal*, when Charles Surface discusses the chances of his uncle's death with the supposed money-lender, who is really his uncle himself. The whole of *The Rivals* (which, on the score of effectiveness in the theatre, plays *The School for Scandal* off the stage) is a succession of situations springing from the ironical effect of mistaken identity and cross purposes.

But it is time to say something more explicit of the nature of Tragedy and Comedy, and of whether clear definitions of either of them are possible.

§

HORACE WALPOLE said that life is a comedy to those who think and a tragedy to those who feel, and it is tempting to make the real distinction the fact that tragedy appeals to the emotions and comedy to the intellect.

This is the basis of Meredith's famous essay on Comedy. He defined it as 'thoughtful laughter,' and regards it as the standard of common sense applied to life's experiences. Its victims are everything which clashes with the norm of pure sanity—anything exaggerated or disproportioned, pretentious or pedantic. It has a vast detached and scientific knowledge of human weaknesses, and of the all-pervading, insidious and ineradicable presence of human self-deception. Its natural prey is human folly 'known to it in all its transformations, in every disguise; and it is with the springing delight of hawk over heron, hound after fox, that it gives her chase.'

Hence intellectual comedy is almost invariably satiric. Even a play like *The Rivals*, though it is all pure fun, has an undertone of satire in its laughter at Lydia's capriciousness and Faulkner's jealousy, at Mrs. Malaprop's pretensions and Sir Anthony's tyranny. There is an element of *exposure* in it: it has no pity for its victims. We can see it very clearly in *The School for Scandal*, which is written in a much more serious vein than *The Rivals*, and in *The Way of the World*, where its medium is the extreme of witty verbal dexterity, and its satire none the less searching for being so cynical and suave. The plays of Bernard Shaw are the best contemporary illustration of this type of comedy. By the application of good-humored but deadly, intellectual logic to the whole of modern society, he has forced it to recognize and to laugh at the shams of political



jobbery, the nonsense of romantic love, the quackery of the medical profession, the hypocrisies of history and the stupidities of war.

But when we have said all we can about the comedy which deals with the discomfiture of human rogues and fools, we find that we cannot possibly pretend that it includes the whole of comedy, or that we can differentiate neatly between comedy and tragedy by saying that comedy deals with the intellect and tragedy with the emotions. Many of the best comedies of manners—*The School for Scandal* is an obvious example—are a blending of intellectual and emotional elements, and when we turn to the comedies of Shakespeare, it is clear that the generalization completely breaks down.

Shakespeare never delighted to 'expose' anything or anybody. He never seems critical of any single idea or ethical standard or custom of his time. The hardness of heart towards knaves and fools, which is an essential of the true comedian of manners, seems unknown to him. Compare the portrait of Sir Andrew Aguecheek, for example, with that of Tattle in Congreve's *Love for Love*. Shakespeare never works in that hard dry light in which the figures of intellectual comedy live and move. When he creates a character which embodies the standard of pure sanity, it is Touchstone, who combines all his laughter at hypocrisy and folly with the most touching loyalty to the two girls, and who even goes so far as to marry the most simple and foolish of country wenches. A hero such as Mirabell in *The Way of the World* is inconceivable in Shakespeare. At any moment in a Shakespearean comedy we may be nearer tears than laughter. Even Doll Tearsheet brings a lump to the throat as she bids Falstaff goodbye: 'Come, I'll be friends with thee, Jack: thou art going to the wars; and whether I shall ever see thee again or no, there is nobody cares.'

As Hazlitt said, Shakespeare's ridicule 'wants the sting of ill-nature . . . his comic muse is too good-natured and magnanimous.' Instead of concentrating his genius on victimizing folly and self-deception, stupidity and greed, his comedies almost all deal with the restoration to happiness of innocent victims of injustice and misfortune of one sort or another. His wit lacks malice and his mockery has no bite.

Comedy is always remarkable for creating worlds which are subject to no laws but their own, and where behavior cannot be measured by the standards of real life. The worlds of *Volpone*, of *The Way of the World* or of *A Kiss for Cinderella* are cases in point, and Shakespeare's comedies are the extreme instance. It is the atmosphere and the mood in which they are created which are their charm. They are full of the utmost absurdities of situation, they are huddled up anyhow to a happy ending for all, and their dialogue is often dull and often tasteless and often shoddy. All standards of realism are completely abandoned. Pepys described *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as 'the most insipid, ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life,' and if purely rational values are applied to romantic comedy that is what it inevitably appears. It is full of the grossest outrages on common sense. In the same way we have got to accept that neither Orlando nor her father recognize Rosalind in her boy's dress; that Imogen can be happy with a contemptible cur like Posthumous, or Helena with one like Bertram; that anyone for a moment could believe the ridiculous slander on Hero, and so on. . . . Yet once we have achieved that willing suspension of disbelief which constitutes poetic faith, and have entered and accepted this world of illusion, it is far richer humanly than the world of any writer of realistic comedy. It is full of the assurance that 'all's brave that Youth mounts and Folly guides'; full of all the charm

and spirit—together with a keen appreciation of the absurdities—of young love; full of a feeling for everything graceful and sweet and gay in humanity and nature; full of a warm delight in oddities of character of all sorts and sizes, and in every class and calling; and full of a rich sense of fun and whole-hearted fooling of every imaginable kind. And finally in his last comedies, the romances, Shakespeare allowed real human evil and suffering to enter this world. The jealousy of Leontes, the disloyalty of Posthumous, the really cruel pain of Hermione and Imogen are quite different from the misfortunes and misdoings of the earlier plays, but yet this evil and suffering are subdued and reconciled to the conclusions of comedy.

So the statement that the distinction between Tragedy and Comedy is that between the appeal to the emotions and the appeal to the intellect cannot stand at all. And if we try to make the division as between plays which end with the death of the principal character and those which do not, we are forced to class *Uncle Vanya* and *The Three Sisters* and *Justice* and *The Silver Box* as comedies, and *The Doctor's Dilemma* as a tragedy. While if we are driven to say it is simply a distinction between stories of human happiness and unhappiness, we must say that *Romeo and Juliet* is a story of human unhappiness, and that *Volpone* is a story of human happiness, either of which is absurd.

## §

AND yet everyone probably agrees that there is *some* similarity which links plays as superficially unlike one another as *Othello* and *The Three Sisters* and *Ghosts* and *Justice*, and another similarity which links plays as unlike as *As You Like It* and *Volpone* and *The Country Wife* and *Man and Superman*.

The similarity can obviously have nothing to do with the actual subject matter of the plays. A jealous husband is the basis of tragedy in *Othello* and of comedy in *The Country Wife*; Cleopatra is a figure in a tragedy to Shakespeare and in a comedy to Shaw. Nor can the likeness be in the personalities behind the plays, nor in their technical use of their medium, for there is nothing in common between them in these matters. It must, therefore, be something to do with the effect they create in the audience or reader, and so we are led to examine more closely what that effect is.

And here we do find a distinction which has, I think, some validity. The essence of comedy is found to lie in one kind of emotional response, and the essence of tragedy in another kind of emotional response. The different effects, that is, are psychological effects. We do not know enough about the human consciousness to say by what psychological workings these results are reached, nor is it of any consequence that we should. It is not the business of literary criticism to understand psychological causes, but to note their effects, to discriminate between them, and to question how they are produced by the means of literary art.

The variety in the emotional solutions of dramatic problems which is the great distinguishing feature of the experiences of tragedy and comedy is not, as we have seen, simply the distinction between happiness and unhappiness—the terror by night and the joy which cometh in the morning. It is rooted in something more complex: that is, in the *emotional values* which prevail at the end of a play. Comedy is concerned with temporal values: tragedy with eternal. Comedy deals with the relationship of individuals to society, and of society to individuals, and its final standards are always *social*. Even in *Man and Superman*, where the superb first act shows Tanner, with matchless wit and dexterity,

making mincemeat of the shams and inconsistencies of the conventional social creed, the end of the play finds him, for all his intellectual honesty, a victim to the life-force which drags him back into the general social pattern of behavior. We see the same thing in *The Way of the World*. Its satire on the world of sex-relationship is, by its implications, as savage and cynical as it well could be: but the end sees Millamant and Mirabell setting out optimistically on the lines laid down by common social law. The conclusions of comedy imply the terms on which ordinary life has got to be lived: it is not concerned with abstract justice but with the judgment of this world, emotional and ethical. It acquiesces quite happily in the death of Louis Dubedat in *The Doctor's Dilemma*, for Shaw makes us feel unmistakably that the gain to society in his death is greater than the loss to art, and the audience is perfectly content to allow the dramatic value of the episode to be that of satiric comedy on the incompetence of doctors. But the judgments of comedy can be very cruel, as we can see in the matter of the rejection of Falstaff. That episode, quite revolting to the sympathetic individual, is essential if the social norm is to be upheld. Henry V has the whole weight of society behind his priggish self-complacency, and by its inexorable standards Falstaff is a besotted and disgusting and dishonest old wretch who must drop out of the story of a hero-king.

And as with its ethical so with the emotional standards of comedy: the response to it is associated with a sense of pleasant release from tension, a satisfying solution of emotional stress, an escaping from misfortune into peace. It is because of this that comedy is always associated with laughter. Laughter is essentially a social thing, and the psychologists tell us it always has a sense of release behind it. In comedy it finds a channel of

expression which it cannot have in actual life, for in art actions and qualities can become laughable by being isolated from the inevitable results which would accompany them in real life, and can therefore be enjoyed with a liberty which life forbids. Falstaff's fatness and drunkenness and senile lechery, as well as his habit of lying and swindling and his care for his own skin, would actually have such unpleasant physical and moral consequences that there would really be nothing funny about them. But in the theatre we are released from the bonds of actuality, and can find a primitive pleasure in identifying ourselves with Falstaff's own freedom from the sense of bodily tyranny, and the importance of moral standards, thus releasing ourselves for a short time from their habitual despotism.

But laughter is not by any means essential to comedy. We can have the sense of a satisfying solution without laughter, and indeed the conclusion of a fine comedy seldom finds us laughing. It may find us in all sorts of moods, for a comedy is a pattern of a personality, and there are therefore as many different comedy flavors as there are personalities who write them, but whether its effect is as simple as *You Never Can Tell* or as complex as *The Tempest*, it will always leave us with a sense of relaxation and contentment in our emotional and intellectual response. There is, presumably, a strong element of wish-fulfillment in our attitude. If we are ourselves rational and sympathetic, we like to see the discomfiture of fools and knaves, and a happy ending to the troubles of the pleasant and the deserving. The conclusion seems to satisfy our consciousness of communal good sense and good feeling: it leaves us with a coherent and stable attitude to life: in it life is made to appear intelligible and finite.

If it does not leave us in this mood; if it has stirred

emotions and has not harmonized them into a satisfying final chord, it has failed as comedy. *The Merchant of Venice*, for example, fails in this way to a modern audience, because of our attitude to Shylock. So does *Much Ado About Nothing* because of the too poignant suffering of Hero: it is revolting to us that she should marry Claudio after the way he has insulted her. So does *Measure for Measure* because the emotional distress of the characters has been too serious for the light-hearted match-making of the conclusion. We are left rebellious, we do not acquiesce in the final judgments: they jar on our sense of what is just and fitting. There is something in the response which forbids that kind of emotional solution.

## §

THAT something is the element of tragedy, which has not been subdued, as Shakespeare subdued it in his later 'romances,' to the conclusions of comedy, and which remains, therefore, an unassimilated element. The scheme of temporal values will not fit the facts. And this is the great difference between tragedy and comedy—that in tragedy we are forced to throw overboard the attitude by which we can find life intelligible. We have got to accept it as it is, and to find a harmony, if a harmony can be found, in the discovery of values other than those of this world.

It is, perhaps, because the full enjoyment of great tragedy is felt by all lovers of literature to be the most comprehensive and the most intense of all their literary experiences, that so much has been written about tragedy, and that the subject is so riddled with critical theory. We cannot escape from Aristotle, though he himself might well have agreed with Dryden, who remarked with admirable good sense:

It is not enough that Aristotle has said so, for Aristotle drew his models of tragedy from Sophocles and Euripides, and if he had seen ours might have changed his mind.

Aristotle declared that the 'tragic emotions' are pity and terror; that a tragedy must not be the spectacle of a perfectly good man brought from prosperity to adversity, for that merely shocks us; and that the only proper subject for tragedy is the spectacle of a man, not absolutely or eminently good or wise, who is brought to disaster not by sheer depravity, but by some error or frailty.

But if we test these statements upon our own experiences in seeing plays, we find ourselves at once questioning whether they really hold good. Is it true that we feel pity and terror more than any other emotions when we see a tragedy? And why should horror or gloom or indignation or rebellion not be 'tragic emotions'? Do we not most certainly feel such emotions even in the greatest tragedies? When Macduff comes in calling out 'O horror, horror, horror!', are we not intended to have the same feeling? Do we not justly feel the warmest indignation in *Othello* or *Antigone*, the bitterest sense of rebellion in *The Trojan Women*, the profoundest gloom in *Ghosts*? And certainly none of the explanations which have been given of Aristotle's 'catharsis'—the purging by pity and terror—seem to square at all with the response of the average play-goer. Does it merely shock us to see the spectacle of a wholly innocent victim? Surely the generations of persons, whether Christians or not, who have been profoundly moved at the drama at Oberammergau, disprove it. But even in secular drama, *The Trojan Women* and *Antigone* and *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Duchess of Malfi* and Shaw's *Saint Joan* are pertinent illustrations.

If we ignore theory in our approach to tragedy, and



judge only by our direct experience of actual drama, we find that there is only one thing which is common to every tragedy, and that is the presentation, in terms of dramatic art, of some aspect of human suffering. The tragic dramatist sees mankind, as every sensitive and observant person must see mankind, compassed about with mystery and misfortune, conquered by fate, the sport of glands or coincidence, at the mercy of character or environment, the perpetual victim of cruelty and injustice and pain. He sees this, perhaps, symbolized in a great traditional myth, peopled with gods and heroes—of how Agamemnon sacrificed Iphigenia to a cruel superstition, and how her mother Clytemnestra revenged her death by murdering her husband, and how her son Œdipus revenged his father by murdering his mother and her lover, and how the gods revenged themselves on him. Or he may see it in the story of an old man following a silly whim of dividing up his kingdom according to the love for him professed by his daughters; or in the story of a man and wife planning a murder for ambition, and how their natures prevented them from being successful criminals. Or he may see it in famous figures of history, such as Antony and Cleopatra or Joan of Arc; or in the story of how social injustice brought a kind, honest charwoman to ruin and despair. Or he may see it in a group of very futile, but very pitiful people, suffering chiefly from the results of their own low vitality; or he may see how the character of a neurotic, unprincipled woman might poison her own life and those of other and better folk.

The spectacle of this human suffering, in whatever form, will inevitably provoke that awareness of the irony of human life which we have already described as the essential of dramatic art; and it is the manner in which the chief character, the 'tragic hero,' is involved

in the ironical situation, which has most to do with the ultimate emotional effect of the play.

Now although it seems quite illogical and untrue to declare that the sufferings of an innocent victim of circumstances are not tragic, it is true that they are not as dramatically stimulating as the subtler forms of irony. The charwoman in *The Silver Box*, or the Duchess of Malfi, or Iphigenia, are not great tragic heroines: they are pitiful figures, crying out with Romeo, 'O, I am Fortune's fool.' All the very greatest figures of tragedy are, as Aristotle said, not absolutely good or wise, and are brought to disaster by some error or frailty. Lear cries out too, 'I am even the natural fool of Fortune,' but beside it we remember Goneril's comment, 'Tis the infirmity of his age; yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself.' And so it is with each of the heroes of the greatest tragedy: the net of disaster in which he becomes ensnared, and finally perishes, is woven in part by himself, however innocently he may have done it.

It used to be a favorite examination question to quote the saying 'Character is Destiny,' and to require the candidates to discuss it in regard to the tragedies of Shakespeare. And indeed it is an interesting question in regard to tragedies in general. Ibsen is, of course, the great example of its application. Relentless psychological truth plays the same part in Ibsen's dramas as the Nemesis of the Greeks: one feels that the plot is constructed with the minutest care to bear out the whole remorseless interplay of psychological cause and effect in human destiny. O'Neill attempts, but I think fails, to create a similar effect in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. With Shakespeare, the irony of circumstance, that is, sheer bad luck, always has a hand in the action. No element of character enters into the fact that Hamlet stabbed

Polonius and not the King behind the arras, or that Desdemona dropped her handkerchief at so ill-starred a moment, or that the message of reprieve for Cordelia reached the prison too late.

But in spite of these unlucky incidents, we do feel that, consciously or unconsciously, the seeds of the tragedy lie in the personality of the chief character. The degree to which he is responsible for his own ruin varies in different plays. Obviously Macbeth is more responsible than Hamlet, Antony than Brutus, Lear than Saint Joan, Rebecca West than Mrs. Alving. The degree of moral guilt involved also varies enormously. Orestes and Macbeth are both murderers, yet Orestes is only a murderer in the sense that Hamlet is one: he *had* to avenge his father. Antigone and Brutus also, act from the highest conviction of duty: Othello did naught in hate but all in honor: Lear made a hasty judgment and let his temper run away with him. In fact, the 'tragic error' is far more often a mistake, some false step taken blindly, than a deliberate offence, or even a symptom of something 'false within.'

And it is for this reason that although it is a characteristic of fine tragic irony that the hero should in some sense be the author of his own undoing, we seldom have any sense of *justice* at the end of a great tragedy. We do have that sense, of course, where the hero is a great criminal. The death of Macbeth is the only possible expiation for his life, and there is something of the same feeling about the deaths of Brutus and of Antony and Cleopatra. But it is unusual to have any conclusion so comforting to our ethical instincts. Comedy, as we have said, does find some solution for human problems, some harmony between individual and social values, but tragedy ignores any such reconciliation. In tragedy we have got to accept that disaster may fall upon people equally whether they mean well or ill: that Hamlet and

Othello, who are so noble and honest, come to the same end as Iago and Edmund who are evil through and through: that Desdemona and Cordelia and Ophelia are sacrificed and butchered: that in death Hedda Gabler and Hedwig Ekdal are equal. Any sense of harmony we may win from these facts can certainly have no relation to temporal or social values.

And it is idle to pretend that any sense of emotional harmony can be found in a great number of tragic plays. There is no doubt that the performance of any good serious play does produce a deep sense of enjoyment, but I believe that to be the enjoyment of the play as a work of art—the effect on the consciousness of the growth and completion of an artistic unity. It is the result of that welding power with which the great dramatist creates the sense of unity, richness and depth in the dramatic conflict. At the conclusion of a fine play we have the sense of a complete, satisfying and enriching experience. The wheel has come full circle, the end is linked inevitably with the beginning, and the result of that triumphant creation of what we call Form has produced those peculiar feelings of assurance and serenity with which we leave the theatre—all that satisfaction of the emotional and intellectual nature which we imply when we say with heartfelt enthusiasm, 'That really is the goods!' Plays such as *The Three Sisters*, or *The Wild Duck*, or *Justice*, or *The Trojan Women*, bring this pleasure—the deep satisfaction of deeply felt and well executed works of art. But *humanly* speaking they remain painful in the extreme, and it is significant that people who are *not* sensitive to drama *as art* never find *any* enjoyment in such plays, and are merely depressed by them. The pitiful death of poor little Hedwig, the incurable heartache of the three sisters, the desolating injustice of *Justice* can obviously produce nothing, if we regard them

simply as a picture of life, except indignant rebellion against, or mournful acceptance of, the helplessness of man and the cruelties of destiny.

But that there is a sense of emotional harmony at the conclusion of some tragedies is attested by universal experience. This may be achieved by the conviction that the death of the hero is the real crown to his tragic story. Milton echoes the feeling of every reader when he sings of Samson's triumph:

Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail  
Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,  
Dispraise or blame, nothing but well and fair  
And what may quiet us in a death so noble.

Or it may be that we feel death to be far kinder than any possible life, as we do at the end of *King Lear*.

O, let him pass! He hates him  
That would upon the rack of this tough world  
Stretch him out longer.

These impressions are quite comprehensible; but it is less easy to account for the sense of exaltation which is undoubtedly in our hearts at the conclusion of *Hamlet* or *Othello*. There are Ophelia and Desdemona dead, the most innocent of helpless victims, and the heroes themselves have really been very near helpless victims too. 'The readiness is all,' says Hamlet as he contemplates his own death, but that is not the feeling of the spectators *about* Hamlet. It is rather a passion of protest that anyone so lovable, so unusual, so full of intellectual and emotional sensitiveness and vigor, should be wasted and sacrificed in a struggle with a creature such as the King. Othello has done more to forfeit the full sympathy of the audience before his death, but the vision of him in all his noble courage and simplicity returns in full force at the end, and we have the same passion of protest that

the base and vile Iago should have had the power to devastate his grandeur.

Yet in spite of this sense of cruel injustice, this baffled eternal cry of humanity, 'God of our Fathers, what is Man?', the final impression is undoubtedly the affirmation of some higher values than those of mere temporal justice. We never watch the struggles of the great tragic hero as the struggles of the worm on the hook. I think it is Bradley who points out that though we speak of the depths of despair or sorrow or suffering, we always speak of the heights of tragedy, and of character and events being lifted on to the tragic plane. And there is great significance in that common use of words. Though the facts of the story may seem to prove the exact opposite, the conviction alive in us at the end of *Hamlet* or *Othello* is that somehow nobility and loyalty and honesty and innocence and courage are the ultimate values: that they are imperishable and absolute, and that though man be wretched and misguided and unlucky, he is *not* mean or contemptible or small.

## §

It is not because Shakespeare's vision of life is any different from that of any other tragic dramatist that his plays create this impression. He saw the great central tragic fact as not only every dramatist, but every thinking and feeling man and woman sees it—the central tragic irony that the interweaving of fate and circumstance and character enmesh everyone alike, the finest as well as the foulest, the noblest as well as the vile. But the secret of Shakespeare's greatness is that he has interpreted the tragic irony of life in dramatic poetry of a fire and richness and range far beyond that of anyone else.

In drama the audience have to be transported *by the*

*spoken word*, out of their own world into the world of the play. On the character of the dialogue, therefore, everything depends. It is what we call 'style' which creates the character of the world into which the artist transports us. It is an artificial world in the nature of things, since it is art, not life, we are watching. But we are aware of quite different experiences as we watch different plays. We may feel that we are being deliberately isolated from our ordinary experience, and transported to an experience which is deliberately limited or distorted by the artist for his own purposes. These, I think, are our feelings about the plays of Ben Jonson, or Congreve or the minor Elizabethans or the early poetic dramas of W. B. Yeats. Or again, we may feel that the world we enter in a play is the world with which we are familiar, sharpened and intensified and reshaped by the vision of the dramatist. These are our feelings about Sheridan or Shaw or Ibsen or Galsworthy. Or again we may feel that we are at one and the same time partaking of the familiar and of the unfamiliar, and that though the world to which we have been transported is a purely artificial world, and is in some ways a limitation or a distortion of our own world, that in its most important aspect it is a world where familiar figures and familiar emotions are transformed by a peculiar change in size and pitch and tone into something of unique rarity and value. And this is the world of Shakespeare and of all great dramatic poetry.

It is a world where the use of *words* is all-important: where the whole tone and coloring and significance of a play may be suggested by the use of certain images and symbols in it; where character can be hinted in the turn of a line, or in the rhythm of a repetition; where sheer music bears a huge emotional weight. Prose *cannot* enter this world.

When Faustus cries:

O thou art fairer than the evening star  
Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars.

or Isabella in *The White Devil* cries:

You have oft, for these two lips,  
Neglected cassia or the natural sweets  
Of the spring violet: they are not yet much withered.

or Antony cries:

I am dying, Egypt, dying; only  
I here importune death awhile until  
Of many thousand kisses the poor last  
I lay upon thy lips.

we are at once in the midst of a completely different experience from that of any prose dialogue.

It is a question for the psychologist or the neurologist to determine why it is that the mere rhythm of verse has a special emotional effect on the human organism. But it is enough for the reader of literature to know that it is so. The pitch is somehow at once raised.

*Lear.* But goes thy heart with this?

*Cordelia.* Ay, good my lord.

*Lear.* So young and so untender?

*Cordelia.* So young, my lord, and true.

*Cleopatra.* He words me, girls, he words me, that I should not  
Be noble to myself: but hark thee, Charmian.

*Iras.* Finish, good lady; the bright day is done,  
And we are for the dark.

There is a magic in this which no prose can touch, and yet there is no loss at all in the dramatic value of the language.

Not, however, that the verse of poetic drama is always strictly dramatic. Even in the short extracts quoted here, there is a distinction of accent which is significant. When Marlowe writes:



O thou art fairer than the evening star . . .

and when Antony says:

I am dying, Egypt, dying . . .

we feel one to be the line of a poet who is writing drama, and the other of a dramatist who is writing poetry. There is always this struggle, as it were, going on in poetic plays, and the plays of Shakespeare are full of speeches which, while they may move us and stir us, and bewitch our ears, are in essence lyrical and not dramatic; that is, they are concerned with creating emotion directly in the audience, rather than with revealing character in action. We have only to compare, for instance, the whole tone of *Romeo and Juliet* with that of *Antony and Cleopatra* to see the broad meaning of this; but even when Shakespeare has perfected his verse as a dramatic instrument, he quite often deliberately uses the lyrical stop to gain some of his peculiar effects.

It is this which vitiates a great deal of the criticism which claims minute psychological truth in Shakespeare's delineation of character. Shakespeare did not value minute psychological truth as, for example, Ibsen did. We do not know by what processes his characters have become what they are: his method is that of revelation, not analysis. His chief aim, to which he bent his whole genius, was immediate 'effectiveness of assertion,' that is, the immediate response of the audience to what is being said, whether it is strictly 'dramatic' or not. For instance, when Antony dies and Cleopatra says:

The crown o' the earth doth melt. My lord!  
O, wither'd is the garland of the war,  
The soldier's pole is fall'n: young boys and girls  
Are level now with men; the odds is gone,  
And there is nothing left remarkable  
Beneath the visiting moon.

it is pure verbal magic which bespells us: a kind of rhythmic and splendid oratory. The effect is the same when Othello, convinced by Iago of Desdemona's faithlessness, bursts out:

O, now for ever  
Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!  
Farewell the plumed troop and the big wars  
That make ambition virtue! O, farewell,  
Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,  
The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife,  
The royal banner and all quality,  
Pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war!

It is not really dramatically relevant to the moment at all, but we do not consider that, we are simply carried along by the rhetoric.

The whole play of *Othello* is, indeed, a very good illustration of Shakespeare's carelessness about logical consistency of character, of his belief—or more probably his natural dramatic instinct—that the essential of a play is that it should live vividly from moment to moment, that the audience should be swept along and transported out of the realms of mere common sense. It is questionable, I think, whether even Shakespeare's genius does accomplish what he set out to do in *Othello*, but in it he certainly strained all his immense powers as an artist to create a series of scenes of dramatic poetry which should make the audience forget the complete lack of consistency of character or adequate motivation of plot in the play. For it is logically impossible that the Othello of the first act, with his matchless dignity and proud reserve, should become the hideous foaming creature who falls so pitifully easily to Iago's foul insinuations. Similarly it is useless to try to discover Iago's real motives for trying to bring Othello to ruin. In spite of his soliloquies, he never convinces us in

the least of any real reason. He represents, as Coleridge said, 'motiveless malignity.' In the same way, we must accept that Desdemona would be such a tactless little ninny as to go on talking about Cassio so persistently when it so clearly annoys her husband; and that Emilia could possibly be as thick-headed about Iago as she has to be. Shakespeare determined that we should not think of these things while we are in the theatre: that we should be whirled along by the emotional current in such an intensity of poetic and dramatic experience that nothing else should matter; that the volume and surge of passion, the heart-breaking pathos, and the sheer music and thunder of words, should deafen us to logic.

*Othello* is a magnificent theatrical *tour de force*, but Shakespeare is a still finer artist when he shows himself a great creator of solid and consistent character, as well as a great poet and a great master of theatre-craft. In *Macbeth*, for instance, the poetry of his part is throughout the revelation of his personality. It is of the essence of his character that he should speak in poetry highly charged with a vivid quality of vision. It is the root of the whole conception of him that he not only sees a dagger in the air and the ghost of Banquo at the feast, but that he no sooner thinks of any action he is going to do, or has done, than his imagination immediately floods his consciousness with pictures and images which illustrate its emotional coloring. When he starts thinking of Duncan's goodness, at once he sees his virtues pleading

like angels trumpet-tongued against  
The deep damnation of his taking off;  
And pity, like a naked new-born babe,  
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin horsed  
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,  
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,  
That tears shall drown the wind.

His mind swarms with horrible suggestions as he waits for the bell which is the signal for the murder.

Now o'er the one half-world  
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse  
The curtain'd sleep; witchcraft celebrates  
Pale Hecate's offerings; and wither'd murder,  
Alarum'd by his sentinel, the wolf,  
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,  
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design  
Moves like a ghost.

And as he looks at his bloody hand, he sees it reddening all the water in the universe.

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood  
Clean from my hand? No; this my hand will rather  
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,  
Making the green one red.

Lady Macbeth knows that she must at all costs keep this faculty in him in check if they are to win success. She cuts him short with ruthless practical suggestions and commands.

*Lady M.* These deeds must not be thought  
After these ways; so, it will make us mad.

*Macbeth.* Methought I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more!  
Macbeth does murder sleep'—the innocent sleep,  
Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleave of care,  
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,  
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,  
Chief nourisher in life's feast,—

*Lady M.* What do you mean?

*Macbeth.* Still it cried 'Sleep no more!' to all the house:  
'Glamis hath murder'd sleep, and therefore Cawdor  
Shall sleep no more: Macbeth shall sleep no more.'

*Lady M.* Who was it that thus cried? Why, worthythane,  
You do unbend your noble strength, to think  
So brainsickly of things. Go get some water,  
And wash this filthy witness from your hand.

And the dullness, dramatically, of the fifth act of *Macbeth*, is because the degeneration of Macbeth is symbolized by his loss of this intense quality of sensibility.

I have almost forgot the taste of fears:  
 The time has been, my senses would have cool'd  
 To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair  
 Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir  
 As life were in't: I have supp'd full with horrors;  
 Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,  
 Cannot once start me.

There is only 'sound and fury, signifying nothing' left in him; and in the play, too.

### §

IN both *Othello* and *Macbeth* we feel very strongly one of the clearest qualities in great poetic drama—the towering *size* of the central characters. The poetry which comes from the mouths of these men is so vital and kindling; it throws such an atmosphere of emotional richness and intensity about them, they live so far more widely and deeply and greatly than common humanity, that they seem far beyond life size. This effect is still more noticeable in *King Lear*, and it is the measure of Shakespeare's genius as a dramatic poet that he could create this effect when he had chosen as his hero a man who had nothing inherently great in him at all. Macbeth and Othello come upon the stage as great soldiers who were already heroes in their own right, but there is nothing heroic about Lear. Apart from the accident of his kingship, he is a stupid, vain, tiresome old man: that is all. But Shakespeare's poetry builds up a sense of suffering so overwhelming in its hugeness

that his dimensions appear titanic. Gradually, by almost imperceptible modulations, he heightens the pitch of the human emotion until in the storm scenes it is fused with all the elemental forces of nature into the sublimity of wild and blinding pain. And following that supreme achievement in the symbolism of agony, Shakespeare created his supreme achievement in pure human pity and tenderness, the meeting of Lear and Cordelia.

*Cor.* How does my royal lord? How fares your majesty?

*Lear.* You do me wrong to take me out o' the grave:  
Thou art a soul in bliss; but I am bound  
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears  
Do scald like molten lead.

*Cor.* Sir, do you know me?

*Lear.* You are a spirit, I know: when did you die?

*Cor.* Still, still, far wide!

*Doctor.* He's scarce awake: let him alone awhile.

*Lear.* Where have I been? Where am I? Fair daylight?  
I am mightily abused. I should e'en die with pity,  
To see another thus. I know not what to say.  
I will not swear these are my hands: let's see;  
I feel this pin prick. Would I were assured  
Of my condition!

*Cor.* O, look upon me, sir,  
And hold your hands in benediction o'er me.  
No, sir, you must not kneel.

*Lear.* Pray, do not mock me:

I am a very foolish, fond old man,  
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more or less;  
And, to deal plainly,  
I fear I am not in my perfect mind.  
Methinks I should know you and know this man;  
Yet I am doubtful; for I am mainly ignorant  
What place this is, and all the skill I have  
Remembers not these garments, nor I know not  
Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me;

For, as I am a man, I think this lady  
To be my child Cordelia.

Cor.

And so I am, I am.

And finally, in the utter banality of Lear's dying words

Never, never, never, never, never!

Pray you, undo this button: thank you, sir . . .

there is the audacity of supreme genius.

### §

THE contrasts in tone and pitch between these scenes show something of Shakespeare's range, but as an example of his most outstanding quality as a dramatist, his comprehensiveness and far-flung scope, look at *Hamlet*. Here he chooses the plot of an old blood and thunder melodrama. He takes nothing from it. Audiences in all ages enjoy excitement and variety of action, and Shakespeare gives them full measure: five deaths on the stage, three appearances of a ghost, a dumb-show and a play within the play, a mad woman, a struggle in a grave at a funeral, a fencing match. Stabbing, drowning, poison, pirates; an angry mob, soldiers marching, cannon firing. It is all there. But he seizes upon the stock characters of the old revenge story, and stuffs them with his own vitality. Each is a living, clear-cut, familiar individuality. Out of their mouths, creating these personalities, come words which stir the spirit and kindle the senses, and surprise and delight the mind, and melt the heart. He adds figures of comedy who give contrast and relief, and finally he creates a hero in whom, more than in any other character he ever formed, he expressed all he himself felt of the beauty, the cruelty, the mystery of the world, and of the complexity of the human spirit. He forced the crude old plot and its stiff stock charac-

ters to provide scope in which he could develop every side of the most complex personality which has ever been created in the theatre: a man who combined the utmost physical, intellectual and emotional vitality, humor and personal charm, and who was at the same time in a condition of agonizing nervous tension. It is impossible not to believe that when he wrote the play, Shakespeare was suffering from some profound shock to his whole nature in which his sexual feelings were deeply involved: for what Shakespeare really added to the play was a marvellous study of the effect on an acutely sensitive man of the insensitiveness of his mother. This distorts the whole of life to him, and when, to this, is added the shock of the revelation of his father's murder and his uncle's guilt, his sense of irony and disillusionment produce a torture of pent-up emotion, which, finding no relief in action, bursts out in words which have never been equalled as a revelation of the human spirit.

It is small wonder if the dramatic task of blending this creation of character with a ready-made rubbishy plot proved too much even for Shakespeare's scope, so that *Hamlet* remains, as T. S. Eliot calls it, the Mona Lisa of the plays. It is not Shakespeare's most perfect work of art; it is not a coherent and consistent whole, but the universality of Shakespeare's mind is in it more than in any other play. There is the capacity he always had, of evoking all types of character as easily as if he were a conjuror bringing rabbits out of a top hat; there in his unerring instinct for every kind of stage effect; but above all, there is his teeming wealth of significant language, the inexhaustible glory of his poetry. In *Hamlet* more than in any of the plays, we know that Shakespeare is the supreme dramatic poet of the modern world, because he can do anything and everything with words.





## THE CRITIC AND THE WORLD TODAY

EVERY piece of literature is the communication of the experience of one individual man or woman, living in a particular age of the world's history, and in particular circumstances and environment. It will inevitably reflect a personality, but there is the further question of how much that personality is influenced by the society in which he lives. What is the relation of literature to what we call the spirit of the age, of the artist to his contemporary world?

There is no doubt that every epoch has a quality of its own which is the result of the social and intellectual forces operating in it. Supposing we say 'Victorian Age'! No sooner have we said it than our minds are flooded with a crowd of pictures and concepts. We see a huge company of immensely virile-looking men with magnificent leonine heads and bushy beards and whiskers. Some of them are writing optimistic poetry about immortality and the joy of effort and nobility and purity; and some of them optimistic prose about England and political economy; some of them are declaiming in ringing optimistic tones about noble causes, adult education, housing, suffrage, and general social reform; some of them are great scientists, with beetling brows, pointing inexorably to skulls and rocks and monkeys; some of them are bankers and businessmen and manufacturers triumphantly illustrating how well the optimistic theories of political economy work themselves out. There is a crowd of clergymen being very rude to the scientists

and to each other, but all convinced that it is God's intention that the bourgeoisie should go on forever being extremely comfortable, and that the lower classes should remain contentedly as they are, and be lowly and humble and serve the bourgeoisie. There are millions of clinging, submissive, pure-minded women leaning for support and guidance on the stalwart, whiskered men, in houses full of solidity and dinginess and Landseer's pictures and purplish mahogany and drawing-room ballads and draperies and family prayers. And all the men and women are absolutely convinced that the moral and social code of their day is a combination of the Law of Nature and the Will of God, and they are all full of high ideals and quite obsessed with the importance of purity.

And what happens if we try to evoke a vision of our own world?

At once we are aware that there *is* no unified picture, as there undoubtedly is of the Victorian world. Naturally that picture is not in any way complete. It is surprising, for instance, to find Matthew Arnold, comparing the ancient world with his own, saying: 'They at any rate, knew what they wanted in Art, and we do not.' It seems to us as if the Victorians knew exactly what they wanted in art. But at any rate, the picture which emerges from the novels and poetry and social history of the time is the embodiment of something of immense solidity and bulk which remains forever in the imaginations of future ages as a symbol of Victorian civilization. And there is nothing at all in the present world to put beside it as a symbol of our civilization.

There has never been an age in the world's history when the social critics have not found plenty to grumble at, and when the glorious past has not been compared with the sorry present. Wordsworth in 1800 speaks of 'the degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation' of the

general public; Mrs. Ellis, writing in 1839, declares, 'by far the greater portion of the young ladies of the present day are distinguished by a morbid listlessness of mind and body, except when under the influence of stimulus, a constant pining for excitement, and an eagerness to escape from everything like practical and individual duty.' There has never been an age which has not complained that never before has progress been so slow and youth so fast, genius so restricted and morals so loose.

There is no need to pay any attention to such eternally recurrent criticism, for it bears no relation to any attempt to see ourselves clearly. The fact remains, however, that our age is one of disintegration. The Victorians had certain profoundly rooted ideas which held them together in an organic society. Victorian man was born within a framework of claims from country, family, religion and society. He sincerely believed that the code represented by these claims was the ultimate moral law. Anyone who achieved self-mastery within this framework was a part of the moral order of the universe, anyone who escaped from those iron bars of duty and set out to gratify self, was at war not only with society, but with eternal laws, and would inevitably reap his reward here or hereafter: 'the wages of sin is death.'

It was, however, Victorians who laid the foundations of the world of today, just as it was a Jew who founded Christianity. It was Clough, who died in 1861, who sang:

Lo, here is God, and there is God!  
 Believe it not, O Man;  
 In such vain sort, to this and that  
 The ancient heathen ran:

. . . . .

Take better part, with manly heart,  
 Thine adult spirit can;

Receive it not, believe it not,  
Believe it not, O Man.

It was Ibsen who wrote play after play to show the cruelty and stupidity of living by moral and social codes which had no relation to human need and denied the expression of natural human emotions. But the gradual change which turned the Victorian age into our own age is not our business here. We are concerned with trying to picture what our own age is, and the world into which contemporary man is born.

First and foremost, it is a world without *design*; there is no framework of claims around man today. Science has shaken his faith in religious dogma, and has forced him to the conclusion that his life is no part of any divinely ordered pattern: that Pope's description of the universe as 'a mighty Maze, but not without a Plan,' is delusive. There appears to be no plan. Politically he is equally isolated. He has no sense of belonging to a political organism of which everyone around him is a conscious and willing part. He finds himself in the midst of the ruins of an old order in politics and finance, and the burning interest of the nineteenth century in social reform no longer kindles him to any enthusiasm.

Socially, the rigid Victorian pattern of behavior has crumbled to nothing. Man has lost his sense of sin. Anthropology tells him that custom furnished the only basis for ethics, and that there is no human action from murder downwards which custom has not at one time justified and at another condemned. Biology and psychology have released him from the dominion of sexual taboos and parental reverence, and he finds evidence on every hand of the corruption and self-interest which are behind every department of organized public social life. Finally, his thoughts of his own entity are haunted

by the consciousness that death is probably annihilation.

The greatest tragedy of spirit is that sooner or later it succumbs to the flesh. Sooner or later every soul is stifled by the sick body; sooner or later there are no more thoughts, but only pain and vomiting and stupor. The tragedies of the spirit are mere struttings and posturings on the margin of life, and the spirit itself is only an accidental exuberance, the product of spare vital energy, like the feathers on the head of a hoopoe or the innumerable populations of useless and foredoomed spermatozoa. The spirit has no significance, there is only the body. . . . However lovely the feathers on a bird's head, they perish with it; and the spirit, which is a lovelier ornament than any, perishes too.

That happy vision of an ordered balanced composition, Man and the Universe, co-related, interdependent; a vast order, with a place for everything and everything gradually getting into its place, has turned into an impressionist sketch of a vast scrapheap; and man, shorn of his sense of security and his confidence of his place in any ultimate scheme of things, is expelled from his Eden. The universe has turned to a mighty stranger.

## §

BUT what has all this to do with literature? What has the Victorian age to do with *Wuthering Heights* and *The Pickwick Papers* and *Atalanta in Calydon* and the poems of Gerard Hopkins? What has it even to do with the creative zest in *Vanity Fair* or *The Mill on the Floss* or *The French Revolution*; with the personal passion of *Villette*, the lyric fire of Browning, the music of Tennyson; with the sensitiveness of Matthew Arnold or the sanity of Morris?

Clearly it has nothing to do with those particular

things. There is something in every work of art which is independent of everything except the eternal emotions of man. Poetry, especially, is often completely isolated from time and place. Hardy said that 'in life the seer should watch that pattern among general things which his idiosyncrasy moves him to observe, and describe that alone.' This accounts for a certain massive obtuseness in certain great artists towards the intellectual advances of their day. They know that the production of their art requires it, and are obstinately deaf to anything but their own personal intuitions. Milton was of this type, and Wordsworth: it is the type of the 'egotistical sublime.' One suspects, too, that the great human creative artist, the Chaucer, the Shakespeare, the Scott, the Fielding, will make himself at home in any age. He is too much concerned with the business of following his own creative destiny, the getting his work done, to bother much about the atmosphere of his age. He takes it for granted and does not question it.

But when we have accepted that, it is still true that the very fact that the artist possesses a sensibility beyond the ordinary makes him acutely impressionable to his environment and the temper of his times. These impose on him certain predispositions which are inescapable. Unconsciously they color the texture of his thought, and open certain channels of intellectual and emotional development to him, while they block others. He can achieve fullness of life only if his individuality can consort in some kind of vital sympathy with the culture of his own day. D. H. Lawrence is a very apposite example of this point. He felt himself so utterly alien and exiled in his own age that the violence of his disgust at it led him to seek feverishly in primitive cultures what he could not find in his own, and to maim his genius cruelly by deliberately cutting his emotional and animal nature adrift from his intellectual con-

sciousness. Indeed, as one of the most sensitive of contemporary artists has said: 'The transaction between a writer and the spirit of the age is one of infinite delicacy, and upon a nice arrangement between the two the whole future of his works depends.' Thus, in the nineteenth century, the writers whom we feel to have been completely at home in their own age were those of great animal vitality or simple creative zest, who, whatever their actual beliefs, could identify themselves easily with the positive temper and the moral idealism of their day; people such as Dickens, Trollope, George Eliot, Charlotte Brontë, Carlyle, Morris, Browning, Meredith. There are others whom we feel to have been more or less ill-adjusted to their environment; Tennyson, Clough, Rossetti, Arnold.

But in the world of today the position is entirely reversed. The temper of the age is so negative that it is only in writers such as Shaw and Wells and Masfield, who really belong to the last generation, that we can find any emphasis at all on the positive values of living. Another great lack in the inspiration of the modern writer is the sense of significant conflict between himself and the creeds which surround him. For one great advantage for literature of a strict code of dogma and behavior, is that the struggles of the human spirit which is tempted to rebel against its chains, and beat itself against its prison bars, make such excellent dramatic material for the man of letters. One cannot imagine what the literature of the world would have been like without the idea of the struggle in man between the will of God, or of the gods, and the desires of his own nature; or without the idea of the importance of chastity in women. Three-quarters of the literature of the world, or more, would cease to be if those subjects were abstracted from it, and they are almost nonexistent in the serious literature of today.

Again, it is, and always has been an instinct of the human spirit to ally itself with some conception of the universe. It craves to feel itself a part of a whole, to conceive of, and to believe in, some scheme in which the individual is part of a larger coördination. Civilization after civilization has created its mythologies, and, on a lower plane, its political fellowships and its social communities, to satisfy this need, and it is the plight of the intelligent man of today that he finds himself among the ruins of the communal faiths of the past, and has no confidence in laying new foundations for the future. In vain he turns to science to help him. In spite of the amateur philosophizing of the great scientists he can find no real help there. The inexorable fact meets him that science can give *no* information about the intrinsic nature of life: it can only investigate and report on its behavior.

It is here that contemporary man, and the contemporary writer, baulked of his longing for a cosmic harmony, has found the channel of investigation which is the peculiar product of the twentieth century—the inquiry into the behavior of the individual human organism. The great writers of the past have all been concerned with the relationship of the individual with the universal forces which surround him, in whatever framework of mythology—Greek, Buddhistic, Hindu, Hebrew or Christian—they happened to see them. Each system provided certain anthropomorphic symbols for mysterious powers and incomprehensible phenomena, and evolved concrete stories and personalities on which the artist could seize. For art *must* work in symbols and images. A poet such as George Herbert could, with absolute simplicity and conviction, see himself and his creator in the relationship of father and child.

I struck the board, and cry'd, No more.

I will abroad.



What? shall I ever sigh and pine?  
 My lines and life are free; free as the rode,  
 Loose as the winde, as large as store.  
     Shall I be still in suit?  
 Have I no harvest but a thorn  
 To let me bloud, and not restore  
 What I have lost with cordial fruit?  
                     Sure there was wine  
 Before my sighs did drie it: there was corn  
     Before my tears did drown it.  
 Is the year only lost to me?  
     Have I no bayes to crown it?  
 No flowers, no garlands gay? all blasted?  
                     All wasted?  
 Not so, my heart: but there is fruit,  
                     And thou hast hands.  
     Recover all thy sigh-blown age  
 On double pleasures: leave thy cold dispute  
 Of what is fit, and not; forsake thy cage,  
                     Thy rope of sands,  
 Which pettie thoughts have made, and made to thee  
     Good cable, to enforce and draw,  
                     And be thy law,  
 While thou didst wink and wouldst not see.  
                     Away; take heed:  
                     I will abroad.  
 Call in thy deaths head there: tie up thy fears.  
                     He that forbears  
     To suit and serve his need,  
                     Deserves his load.  
 But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wilde  
                     At every word,  
 Me thoughts I heard one calling, *Childe*:  
                     And I reply'd, *My Lord*.

We can compare this with *In Memoriam*, where there is no sense at all of a God as an all-wise and all-loving Deity, but only of the poet's own agonized need of a faith which will 'work'! Either view would appear

definitely 'dated' today. For the purposes of vital literature all the old formal myths and legends of the relation of the soul and the universe are dead. Their life is now for us the vitality of art, not of direct experience. When a distinguished modern poet writes a religious poem today, he creates a series of private symbols for his emotion. *Ash Wednesday* has more in common with Herbert than with Tennyson, but it could not have been written in either the seventeenth or the nineteenth centuries. And to the majority of creative artists of today, the Soul has become the Unconscious, and mythology has turned into the personal phantasmagorias of *The Waste Land* or *Ulysses*.

## §

I HAVE written elsewhere in this book on the methods of modern literature in the revelation of the ego, and it only remains to say something of how the character of literature and society today particularly affects the reader and critic of books.

The critic, like the artist, is an individual. The palate is a very personal possession, and the sincere enjoyment of literature depends upon the satisfaction of the personal needs of each of us: no amount of argument can alter that. Age and temperament and personal experience are inevitably and inextricably bound up in the responses of each individual to every work of literature he reads. We all of us have something of John Thorpe in us, as he gives his opinion of Madame d'Arblay's *Camilla* in *Northanger Abbey*.

I took up the first volume once, and looked it over, but I soon found it would not do; indeed I guessed what sort of stuff it must be before I saw it; as soon as I heard she had married an emigrant, I was sure I should never be able to get through it.

And the limitations of the individual in criticism can be paralleled in the limitations of the spirit of the age. For the critic again, like the artist, lives in a particular age of the world's history and in particular circumstances and environment. Each age in turn revalues works of art according to its own needs and the quality of its own outlook, and there is always that element in the appreciation of literature which is summed up by Charles II's comment on the popularity of a certain preacher among the Londoners of that day: 'Well, I suppose his nonsense suits their nonsense.'

But no age is the law and the prophets. The men and women of today, whatever their peculiarities of outlook, are the descendants of many centuries of men and women very much like themselves, and the literature of today is a living part of the literary traditions of many centuries. As individuals each of us passes:

There are no fields of amaranth on this side of the grave; there are no voices, O Rhodope, that are not soon mute, however tuneful: there is no name, with whatever emphasis of passionate love repeated, of which the echo is not faint at last.

And as an age, our age will pass just as other ages have passed. Future epochs will see us in perspective in the vision of time, as we cannot see ourselves. They will be able to sift what is ephemeral from what is lasting in our personalities and our achievements and our writings; they will sort and catalogue our catchwords and our affectations, our habits of mind, our beliefs and disillusionments, our sincerities and our shams; and label us 'early twentieth century.'

But that is not all. Behind the grouping of ideas and fashions which create the particular pattern of our own epoch, there are the eternal rhythms of life itself: behind our particular disillusionments, there are the faiths

and the disillusionments of all time: behind our psychoanalysis, there are the passions and frustrations of the centuries, and behind our exploration of the unconscious there is the age-old knowledge of the human heart.

Where then shall the critic stand? 'I care not much for new books,' wrote Montaigne in the sixteenth century, 'because the old seem fuller and of stronger reason.' It is the eternal plea of the middle-aged lover of reading in all ages. Beside it we can put D. H. Lawrence, 'damn their discipline. If you've got to make mistakes—and who hasn't—make your own, not theirs': which is the eternal taunt of the rebel. What position shall the critic choose? What shall be his advice to those who want to know what books they shall read and how they shall read them?

There are many answers.

'The important critic,' says T. S. Eliot, 'is the person who is absorbed in the present problems of art, and who wishes to bring the forces of the past to bear upon the solution of these problems.' Here it is clearly the critic-artist speaking. Another critical iconoclast, F. R. Leavis, defines a good critic as 'one who helps the creative situation': but one cannot help thinking that the creative situation is best left to the artists, who know very well that the solutions of their problems have finally to be personal to themselves.

Max Eastman will have it that criticism can be scientific and that we can define literature in terms of biology. To all its mysteries, moreover, he opposes the view that 'it is absurd to say that these questions cannot be answered; they can be answered as soon as we understand our minds.' It sounds simple, and no doubt many mysteries will be revealed when science discovers what Life is, but meanwhile, just as the scientist cannot explain life, but must continue to describe it in terms

of matter and energy, so the literary critic is in no sight of the day when he can explain creation in terms of psychology, and is still doomed to continue trying to describe its results in terms of known experience.

I. A. Richards, who was the pioneer in the field of the psychological interpretation of artistic experience, has now shifted his investigations to semasiology, or the science of language. In the future of this neglected and obscure subject of inquiry he sees the future of all important criticism, since to ask about the meaning and behavior of words is to challenge the entire technique by which man interprets his modes of thought. He believes that the philosophical study of language is capable of opening to us new powers over our minds, comparable to those which systematic physical inquiries are giving us over our environment.

But it is clear that such a study is a matter for specialists. It requires an intellectual scope and a theoretical equipment in the knowledge of psychology and logic far beyond the capacity of the ordinary reader, whose comment is inevitably that of Pater on Coleridge, 'he withdraws us too much from what we can see, hear and feel.'

Again, there is always the critic who is mainly concerned with literary history, with matters of social and intellectual background, and problems of textual scholarship. These things must always be the indispensable background to the study and understanding of literature; taste cannot stand firm without knowledge. But when all is said and done, the training of taste remains the simplest and the most comprehensive value of criticism.

Genius is the power of producing excellence; taste is the power of perceiving the excellence thus produced in its several sorts and degrees, with all their force, re-

finement, distinctions and connections. In other words, taste is strictly the power of being properly affected by works of genius.

To Hazlitt, the aim of criticism is to receive and to define the characteristic quality of works of art. That is, criticism is interpretation of literature. Taste cannot be taught by criticism: it is familiarity with books which alone can bring the real enjoyment of literature, but the companionship of sympathetic interpreters can itself be one of the great delights of reading.

There are no laws of criticism which are immutable, and no opinions in powerful rhyme or prose which can be cast into the monument of absolute values. Criticism, like art itself, must always remain personal. But behind all personal views there *is* a standard, which if it is not absolute, is at least rooted and durable, just as behind the vagaries of any one age there is the stability of the reiterated values of all the ages. Dr. Johnson said of *The Pilgrim's Progress* that it had the best of all recommendations, 'the general and continued approbation of mankind': and that is a standard which nothing can shake. 'He was on the side of sense and taste and civilization'; is that not the summing up of his standpoint which any reader of literature would choose? Problems of pure aesthetics will always fascinate the lover of abstract speculation. As Bradley said: 'Metaphysics is the finding of bad reasons for what we believe upon instinct; but to find these reasons is no less an instinct.' But the enjoyment of literature is a more general and humane occupation. It is bound to be influenced in some degree by the rigidities and prejudices which are inseparable from individual human nature, but the art of criticism (for it is an art, although a small one) has much in common with the art of living. In both, the positive is of more value than the negative: it is of more importance to be cultivated than to be censorious;

to have intellectual and emotional good breeding than mere brains; to enjoy than to dislike; to love than to hate. Knowledge must be there, to be sure, but to it the man of taste brings a kind of intellectual wisdom, a general spirit of discrimination and good judgment, a power to recognize and to value the width and variety of life's scope, and to relate the experiences of the mind with those of the emotions and the senses. To him life and literature challenge each other at every turn: memory and revelation go hand in hand. As knowledge of men and experience of living come to him, he responds more fully and sensitively to literature: as his knowledge of literature increases, he responds more fully and sensitively to life. 'One cannot be seriously interested in literature and remain purely literary in interests.'

Thus, although we live today in an agnostic and disillusioned age, the sympathetic reader of literature, though he can point to no tables of the law which enshrine the rules of his code, has nevertheless a standard of values which he feels in his bones to be unchangeable and unchallenged. In the midst of the crashing of creeds and the collapse of economic, social and moral precedent; in the midst of the greed of commerce, the hypocrisies of politics, the vanity of dictators; in the face of the whole chaos and confusion, the muddle and mess, he can declare a clear and simple faith.

He can say that he believes in the eternal human values which are incarnated in the figures of Prometheus or Hamlet, of Esmond or Imogen, of Jane Eyre or Constance Povey. He can say that he believes in the grandeur of *Paradise Lost* and the grace of *Gather Ye Rosebuds*, in the flame of *Tyger, Tyger burning bright*; in the austerity of *Rosmersholm* and the perfect harmony of the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. He can say that he believes in the wit of Congreve and the wisdom of

George Eliot; in the sensibility of Donne and the profundity of Dostoievsky; in the intelligence of Aldous Huxley and the friendliness of Dr. Johnson; in the intellectual honesty of Shaw and the intellectual curiosity of Wells; in the wide, sympathetic, sophisticated sanity of Chaucer and Fielding and Tolstoi; and in the might, majesty, dominion and power of the poetry of Shakespeare.

This is a faith of which no lover of literature need be ashamed; and the critic can but try to further this faith, in a spirit of approach to both past and present like that of one of the most wide-minded and civilized of modern writers—Arnold Bennett.

My aim has been to keep a friendly attitude; to avoid spleen, heat, and above all, arrogance. I come neither to scoff nor to patronize, but to comprehend.





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